**the shield of that red star**

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# the shield of that red star

by r_astra

Summary

It wasn’t that Jason didn’t like living with Roy. It was just that, once he got his head on straight and realized it was something he could do again, he couldn’t stop thinking about moving back to Gotham.

Notes

Title from Henry Wadsworth Longfellow's The Light of Stars (originally titled A Second Psalm of Life).

See the end of the work for more notes

# Chapter 1

It wasn't that Jason didn't like living with Roy. He did. He liked the hominess of the apartment and the way Roy lounged against the counter and rambled about anything and everything while Jason cooked in the little kitchen. He liked knowing there was a warm, safe bed he could crawl into on the nights he woke up and couldn't breathe. He liked the sound of Lian's screeching and giggling and he liked the way Roy looked at her, like she was the whole universe, everything there ever was and ever will be, condensed into a gap-toothed grin and self-cut bangs.

It wasn't that Jason didn't like living with Roy. It was just that, once he got his head on straight and realized it was something he could *do* again, he couldn't stop thinking about moving back to Gotham.

Roy offered to move with him, and maybe, someday, Jason will take him up on it, but Lian's in school and it's a *good* school. It'd be fucking selfish, to pull her out in the middle of the school year just so Jason has someone who will let him cry into his shirt after a bad nightmare.

It's not so bad, anyway, living alone again. He's got a nicer apartment than any he used to, with ceilings that don't drip and a couch that is more comfortable than most beds he's slept in. The kitchen is nice. Not huge, but well laid out. The neighbors aren't too loud, one of them is a single mom a decade or so older than Jason who's always trying to get him to eat more.

It's nice.

And if he's a little clingy when Roy and Lian come to visit? He can live with that. It's worth it, to be back in Gotham. He hadn't realized how bad the itch under his skin had gotten until he stepped out on the fire escape the first night and took what suddenly felt like his first full breath in more than a year.

What a wonder, Gotham is, that she can chew you up and spit you out as many times as she wants and you just keep running back.

He takes a few weeks to settle in, get the lay of the land before donning the helmet and hitting the streets for real. Surprisingly, Crime Alley isn't doing too bad. It seems like, sometime in the year and a half between the night he shot Penguin and now, one of the Bats decided to give a damn about his shitty little corner of the city.

His money's firmly on Blondie, so he's a little shocked when he catches a flash of electric blue swinging up to a rooftop perch a few blocks over.

Every muscle in his body goes still as he watches Dick watch over his city. If he stays here, on the lip of his apartment building's roof, the older man will notice him eventually. That's why he went up there for a smoke in the first place, instead of the fire escape. But he was expecting Spoiler to drop by, not Nightwing.

He could leave. If he put out the cigarette, stuck to the shadows, Dick might not notice.

He takes another drag, eyes locked on Nighwing's crouching form.

He should leave. He should—He hadn't planned on talking to Dick, he doesn't know what to say or what to ask or—

Nightwing's silhouette goes predator-still, head slightly cocked. He's looking right at Jason.

Fuck.

Jason puts his cigarette out with numbing fingers and lights another. His hands are shaking a little and he's irrationally angry with them for it.

It's just Dick. It's just—

"Hey, Jay."

Jason grunts in response, taking another drag to buy some time to think of something to say.

"I can—" Dick cuts himself off, looking unsure under the domino. He's perched a good ten feet away, well out of grabbing range, and Jason hates him a little for being fucking *considerate*. What an asshole. "I can go," he says. "If you want? I mean—I—"

Jason scoffs a little.

Dick hesitates, body stiff, awkward. "Just—just tell me if you want me to leave," he says, "and I'll go. Okay?"

"Yeah, whatever."

"Okay," Dick says, relief filling his voice. He sits down cross-legged,

sideways on the lip of the roof so he's facing Jason. He doesn't move any closer.

"So, you're the one that's been patrolling the Alley?" Jason asks after a minute of awkward silence.

"Uhh, yeah. I—After—after, you know," he stutters out. "It was the least I could do."

Jason grunts. "Figured it was Blondie."

"It is. I mean—She added it to her patrol route after—after Penguin. I just started helping after—after, uh, you know." He clears his throat, fidgeting nervously.

Jason smokes for a minute, then says: "Good job, I guess. Hasn't totally gone to shit."

"Um. Thanks. It was really—you had it in a good place, before. We just did, you know, maintenance."

He doesn't have anything to say to that, so he just lights another cigarette. He's going to make himself sick, chain smoking like this when he'd more or less quit, living with Roy, but that's a later-Jason problem.

"So, uh. How've you been?"

Jason raises his eyebrows at him.

"Sorry," Dick blurts out. "I mean—you don't have to—"

"Take a breath, Dickwing," Jason says. "Jesus."

Surprisingly, he listens, taking a minute to steady himself before continuing. "You don't have to answer that," he says finally. "I know I don't have any right to—to demand a status update or anything. I just —" he swallows, looking at Jason all wide-eyed and pathetic, "I just worry about you, sometimes, you know?"

Jason turns to look out at the city, exhaling roughly.

"Better," he says after a minute, voice low. "I've been better."

"Good," Dick says. "Good. Jay, I'm—I'm so glad." He gets a little choked up at the end and Jason has to close his eyes, breathing deeply.

“How’s Gotham?” he asks after a beat.

Dick accepts the change of subject immediately, even though Jason’s sure he wants to know more. “Gotham’s doing well,” he says. “We haven’t had an Arkham breakout in months. Not since B—”

Jason tries to suppress the flinch, but Dick, of course, sees it anyway.

“Sorry,” he says quickly, a little bit of panic in his voice. “Sorry. I—”

“Jesus Christ,” Jason swears, crossing his arms over his chest. “I’m not made of fucking glass, Dick. You can say his fucking name.”

“I don’t have to,” Dick says quietly. “I can—we can just not talk about him, if you want. We can—He’s not—Do you want me to talk about him?”

Jason closes his eyes again, shoulder’s hunching as he curls in on himself a bit. “No,” he says finally, whisper quiet. “No, I don’t want you to talk about him.”

“Okay,” Dick says, rallying a bit. “Okay. So. No Arkham breakouts. We’ve reorganized things a bit, so there’s less… hierarchy? I represent Gotham with the JL, Red’s the boss when it comes to investigative work, and Black Bat's in charge of field work. I moved back to Gotham fulltime and, uh, Robin lives with me, now.”

“What?” Jason asks, head whipping around to stare at Dick.

He rubs the back of his neck nervously. “Yeah. Um. Obviously, I don’t *officially* have custody, ‘cause that would, you know. Cause some problems. But. He lives with me.”

“What the fuck,” Jason says, disbelief quickly turning into rage. “What the *fuck*.”

“I know I’ve made mistakes,” Dick says, his voice a little wobbly.

“Why the fuck does he think—” Jason talks over him, not interested in fucking excuses.

“And I understand why you feel that way, but I promise I’m trying to —”

“—that he can throw away his own fucking *kids*?” Jason finishes, gesturing sharply. “What a fucking asshole! He never—”

"…What?"

Something in Dick's voice stops Jason in his tracks. He jerks his head around, looking at the older man closely.

"What the fuck," he says. "Why are you crying? What—"

Dick holds up a hand. "Wait. Just—wait." He takes a deep breath, still a little shaky. "Why are you upset," he says eventually, voice slow and deliberate, "that Robin lives with me?"

Jason stares at him. "Because B's the world's richest deadbeat baby daddy?"

Dick laughs a little, the sound strangled and somehow very relieved. "Okay," he says. "Okay. Misunderstanding. I *took* Robin. B didn't give him up."

"…What?"

Dick shrugs self-consciously. "We all agreed it was best. Robin and me and Agent A."

"Oh." Jason swallows. "Oh. So, when I said…"

Fuck. He's an asshole.

"Dick," he says, a little desperate. "I didn't mean—"

"It's okay," Dick says, smiling a pathetically sad little smile. "It's fine. Even if you had, you have every right—"

"Fuck you," Jason snaps. "Fuck you and your stupid fucking—" Jason growls, scrubbing a hand through his hair. "You love the shit out of that kid," he says. "I know you'd never hurt him. I *never* thought you'd hurt him."

"I hurt *you*," Dick says quietly. "I love you, and I hurt you. So. You have the right to ask."

"That's—" Different. That's different. Jason's—

Jason's *Jason*. He's—it doesn't mean Dick would hurt anyone *else*.

…Which Jason's self-aware enough these days to realize is maybe a fucked-up thought.

Dick must be able to read his thought process on his face or something because the next thing he says is: “I know we weren’t going to talk about it. But I think it’s important for you to know that B used to hit me and Red, too.”

Jason stares at him.

“Not—not a lot,” he says, stumbling over the words. “Not like with you. I’m not trying to say—” He stops, breathes. “It wasn’t like it was with you. Not at all. Not even *close*. So I’m not trying to make it out like, like it was the same. But it—it wasn’t *you*, you know? It was him. It was him, and his issues, and his damage, okay? It wasn’t your fault.”

Jason opens his mouth to say something, anything back, but the words won’t come out.

*It wasn’t your fault .*

Roy’s said those words to him a million times, whispered them and shouted them and everything in between, but it’s different, somehow, to hear Dick say it.

“Can I—” Dick starts, shifting forward. “Do you mind if I—”

Jason shrugs, still wordless, and Dick is at his side in an instant, arms wrapped tight around him.

“I’m sorry, Jay,” he says. “I’m sorry it happened and I’m sorry I didn’t do anything earlier and I’m sorry you,” his voice cracks, “were *alone* for so long. I’m so sorry. It wasn’t your fault. None of it was your fault.”

Jason doesn’t hug him back, but he lets his head drop, burying his face in Dick’s shoulder. “I provoked him,” he says, the words muffled and quiet. “I—”

“It doesn’t matter,” Dick says firmly. “It doesn’t matter. There’s nothing you could’ve done that would excuse how he treated you, okay? *Nothing*.”

Jason’s lungs hitch. The patch of Dick’s uniform under his face starts to get damp.

“I’ve got you, Jay,” Dick says, voice low. “I’ve got you. I’m not going anywhere.”

And that's all it takes. Jason wraps his arms around the older man—around his *brother*—and starts sobbing.

One of Dick's hands cups the back of his head, gloved fingers carding through his hair lightly, while the other rubs soothing circles over his back.

"I'm sorry," Jason manages between sobs.

"Nothing to be sorry for, little wing," Dick says firmly, tightening his grip.

Jason just shakes his head against his shoulder, crying too hard to say anything back. Dick just holds him, humming soothing assurances into his hair.

Finally, after more tears than Jason's ever cried in his *life*, his lungs finally settle down, leaving Jason without enough energy to do anything other than stay slumped against Dick's chest.

"I know I've fucked up," Dick says eventually. "And I'm not—I'm not asking for forgiveness or anything. I just—I love you, Jay. Okay? You're my brother and I'd do anything—*anything*—to keep you from getting hurt again."

Jason doesn't say anything for a long time. Just keeps his face pressed into Dick's shoulder and breathes. Finally, he says: "Love you, too, Dickie."

Dick exhales heavily, a little shaky. He holds Jason a little tighter.

"And I—" Jason cuts himself off, taking a deep breath. "I figured out, a while ago. That—um. That Joker wasn't—that—" He huffs, frustrated. "He wasn't in Arkham with me. I—Roy keeps tabs. So. When I mentioned it, he, uh. Told me."

And hadn't that been a fun conversation? He'd spent the next few weeks asking Roy to confirm that every little thing he saw or heard was real, terrified he'd developed fucking schizophrenia or something and just *hadn't realized*.

Fun times.

"So. Sorry for that."

Dick shifts a little but doesn't let go. "It's okay," he says. "I—Just

because he wasn't there doesn't mean it was the right choice to put you there. I never should've—" He takes a deep breath. "I put a lot of work into reform there, a while back, and I just assumed—I should've realized how bad it would be for you there. I'm so, so sorry."

Jason buries his face deeper, blocking out the rest of the world. "I—I don't think I can forgive you," he says quietly. "Not yet. I still—I'm sorry, I—"

"Shh," Dick soothes, fingers carding through his hair again. "It's alright. You don't have to be sorry. It was—It was really bad, wasn't it?"

Jason nods against his shoulder, choking back a sob.

"Yeah," Dick says sadly. "So, no worries, okay? You take as long as you need."

As long as he needs. Jesus.

After another minute, Jason lifts his head and pulls back, inhaling deeply and scrubbing the tear tracks off his face. He feels gross. His eyes are all itchy.

"Do you want to, uh," Jason says awkwardly, gesturing to the access door, "see the place?"

"Your apartment?" Dick asks carefully.

"Yeah."

"I'd love to, little wing." Dick's voice is so soft it's almost painful.

"Jesus," Jason huffs, heading for the door. "It's just an apartment."

"It's *your* apartment," Dick says. "I've never been invited into your apartment before."

"I've been here for *three weeks*," Jason complains. "It's not like it's been years or any—"

"I've never been invited into *any* apartment of yours before," Dick clarifies.

Oh. Well, yeah. Makes sense. It's not like they were on hanging out terms before now.

“Well,” Jason says awkwardly as they get to the bottom of the stairs and he flips on the lights. “Here it is.”

“In-unit roof access,” Dick says. “Nice.”

“Yeah,” Jason agrees. “I can make food? If you’re hungry?”

“Sure,” Dick says, smiling. “I could eat.”

“Cool. Um. I’m gonna wash my face. You can grab clothes from the bedroom if you want to change.”

“Sounds good, Jay.”

“Cool,” Jason repeats awkwardly, then retreats to the bathroom.

He exhales heavily, leaning over the sink for a beat. When he looks up, he’s unsurprised to find that he looks like a wreck. Puffy and blotchy and swollen. The cold tap water feels good, though, and he spends a couple minutes just cupping it over his closed eyes before actually washing his face.

When he emerges, Dick is sitting on the solitary stool at the counter, still wearing his uniform, but with a pair of Jason’s joggers and his Gotham Knights hoodie sitting folded in front of him.

“Hey,” he says, smiling. “Do you mind if I shower?”

“’Course,” Jason says. “There’s, uh. I think there’s a clean towel in the cupboard.”

“Awesome.” Dick hops off the stool, scooping up the stack of clothes.

“Awesome,” Jason echoes under his breath after the bathroom door closes behind him.

Fuck. This is so weird.

He takes a minute to rummage around the fridge and cabinets, deciding what to make, then starts pulling out ingredients.

Dick emerges a few minutes later, brushing his damp hair off his forehead. “Jay,” he says seriously. “Please, please, tell me you don’t actually use 2-in-1 shampoo and conditioner.”

Jason grunts.

Dick flops onto the stool dramatically. “Jason,” he moans. “Why are you like this?”

“It’s all the same.”

“No,” Dick says, aghast. “No, no, no. It is not all the same.”

Jason ducks his head, hiding a small smile.

“How is your hair even—” Dick gestures emphatically.

“Genes, Dickie,” Jason teases. “Some people have good ones.”

“No. *No.* I refuse to accept this. How—*Roy*. You borrow Roy’s? Please tell me you borrow Roy’s shampoo and conditioner.”

“You think Roy uses shampoo?”

Dick makes a strangled, horrified sound and Jason bursts out laughing.

“I’m going to buy you new stuff,” Dick promises. “I’m—I can’t accept this behavior from a member of my own family. And *Roy*. Oh my God. Does he seriously…?”

“Just bar soap,” Jason confirms.

“But—but Lian!”

“He has that tear-free stuff for Lian, he just doesn’t use it.”

Dick buries his head in his hands, moaning. “I can’t talk about this anymore. It’s too depressing.”

“You’re so fucking extra,” Jason laughs. “It’s just hair, man.”

“Just hair?” Dick says, comically exaggerated horror on his face. “Just —How could a member of my own family say something so horrible?”

Jason just rolls his eyes.

Dick stares at him silently. Waiting.

Jason frowns, suddenly self-conscious. “What?”

“Have you not seen Avatar?”

“What’s Avatar?”

“Oh my God,” Dick says, with seemingly genuine horror. “Oh my *God.* ”

“Is that the thing with the blue people?”

“The blue people?” Dick sputters. “No. No! *Jason!* The Last Airbender? You know, Aang and Katara and…?”

Jason shakes his head bemusedly.

“Forget about the shampoo,” Dick says, intensity cranked up to fucking eleven. “Do you have a TV?”

“Yeah, I have a TV.”

Dick’s at his side in an instant, tugging him away from the stove. “Living room,” he says. “Right now. I can’t let this tragedy persist for another moment.”

“Dick,” Jason complains, pulling away. “Dick, my curry—”

“Fuck your curry!” Dick says. “I’ve failed in my duties as an older brother. I can’t believe this!”

“Oh my God, you overgrown child,” Jason laughs. “Have some fucking patience. It’ll be done in like, half an hour.”

“Fine,” Dick grumbles, slumping back onto his stool. “But then we’re watching Avatar, okay?”

“Sure, Dickie,” Jason says, smiling into the curry as he stirs. “We can watch it.”

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He’s halfway through making pancake batter when he realizes he’s out of baking powder. The bacon’s still in the oven and there’s not enough time for him to run to the store and back before it burns. He’d make Dick go, but he’s still passed out cold on the couch.

Jason frowns at the batter for a minute, then throws a hoodie on to cover up the scars on his bare chest, and heads down the hall.

“Oh, thank God,” Eliana says when she answers the door, dumping a toddler in his arms. “Hold this.”

“Um,” Jason says to the child. It’s a boy, he thinks. He’s sucking his thumb. “Hi, kid.”

“Hi,” the kid says, muffled by the thumb still in his mouth. “I’m Danny.”

“Jason. I’m your neighbor.”

“I know. Mami says you don’t eat enough. Eat. More.” The kid pokes him in the chest twice, in time with the last two words.

A startled laugh bursts out of Jason’s chest at the fierce expression on his tiny face. “Okay, tiger. I’ll try.”

“Good.”

“What about you? You eating all your vegetables?”

The kid doesn’t seem particularly interested in that topic. “Why do you have skunk hair?” he asks instead.

“Because it looks cool.” And because dye won’t stick to the white streak, no matter how hard he tries.

Danny giggles around his thumb. “No, it doesn’t.”

Jason gasps in mock offense. “You take that back!”

“No!”

“I’m so sorry,” Eliana says, reappearing with triplet number two on her hip and three clinging to her pant leg. “How are you, Jason? How’s your…niece?”

“Goddaughter,” Jason supplies. “I’m good, thanks. Lian’s doing well. She’s visiting this weekend.”

Eliana smiles. “Glad to hear it. We’ll have to set up a playdate sometime for her and my oldest.”

“Sounds great. I’ll mention it to her dad.”

“Perfect!” she says, herding him inside. “Sorry about the chaos. Trying to get out the door is always a disaster. My sister was going to watch

them, but she cancelled, and I have to work today, and—it doesn't matter. Did you need something?"

"Um," Jason says awkwardly, hiking up the kid on his hip. "I was going to ask if I could borrow some baking powder? My brother's visiting and I was making pancakes—"

"Pancakes!" all three triplets scream in perfect unison. Eliana drops her head into her hands.

A fourth—*fourth* child, this one slightly bigger, but not as big as the one about Lian's age, appears from the hallway, toothbrush sticking out of her mouth. "Mami, are you making pancakes?"

"No, mija," Eliana says. "No time for pancakes. Finish brushing your teeth."

The girl-child groans dramatically, disappearing back into the hall.

"Sorry?" Jason says.

Eliana flashes him a put-upon sort of smile. "Don't be. What are neighbors for?"

Jason trails her to the kitchen. While she rummages through the cupboards, the leg-clinging child wanders over to Jason, raising his hands in an obvious 'pick me up' gesture. Jason obliges, shifting Danny so he isn't jostled too much.

"Hi, Big Neighbor," the new kid says.

"Hi back, Tiny Neighbor."

Danny laughs, bright and loud and right in Jason's ear.

"Not tiny," the leg-clinger huffs.

"Oh, yeah?" Jason says. "How old are you?"

"Almost four!" he says proudly. "I'm going to start *preschool* next year."

"Wow," Jason says. "Preschool?"

"Uh huh."

"I take it back, then, I guess, Big Neighbor."

The kid giggles. “You’re Big Neighbor!”

“What am I supposed to call you, then?”

“I’m *Beto*,” the kid says, with an *obviously* sort of tone even though it’s definitely the first time he’s said his name.

Eliana laughs a little and Jason jerks his head up to see her watching him, jar of baking powder in hand.

“Um,” Jason says, realizing he doesn’t have a hand free to take it. “Pocket?”

She laughs again, tucking the jar into his hoodie pocket.

“Come on, now, kiddos,” she says. “Time to stop bothering Jason and go to abuela’s house. I’m going to be late for work.”

The triplets groan in unison.

“But Mami,” the third triplet whines. “Abuela never makes us pancakes!”

“Pancakes, Mami!” Danny adds. “Can’t we stay with Jason instead?”

“Yeah! Can we stay with Jason? Please, Mami?”

“Pleeeeaase?” Beto whines.

“Please, Mami?”

“Just this once?”

“I want pancakes!”

Eliana looks at the ceiling like she’s asking Jesus for strength, then levels that patented long-suffering-parent expression at Jason. “Do you have any plans for the day?”

What?

“Um. I mean. I’m not busy? My brother is making me marathon Avatar.”

The kids all gasp in delight. The girl reappears in the doorway. “Did someone say Avatar?”

Eliana groans. “Do you mind?” she asks Jason. “I can be back by two. And,” she checks the clock, grimacing, “otherwise I’m going to be very, very late.”

“I don’t mind,” Jason says honestly. “They seem like good kids.”

“Thank you so much,” she says, scribbling her number on a napkin and tucking it and the apartment keys into his pocket with the baking powder. “Call me if you need anything. Lock the door on your way out!”

And then she’s gone.

Jason looks down at the two small children in his arms, then at the two staring solemnly up at him from the floor.

“Pancakes?” Danny asks.

“Yeah, buddy,” Jason laughs. “Let’s go make some pancakes.”

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Dick wakes up and nearly has a heart attack. Two pairs of big, dark eyes stare down at him, unblinking.

“Jason?” he calls out, voice high.

“What?” his brother calls back.

“Who’s in your apartment?”

“What?” Jason repeats, closer.

Dick cranes his neck to peer over the arm of the couch. Jason’s standing in the doorway, flour in his hair and a whisk in hand. Dick gestures to the children, one of whom is perched on his chest like an overgrown cat.

“Milo, Beto,” Jason says, lightly scolding. “I told you not to bother him!”

The kids grumble, but the one on top of him clambers off and both trot over to Jason as he disappears back into the kitchen.

Dick sits up slowly, unsure if he's actually awake or if this is all a dream.

"Coffee's still hot," Jason says when Dick makes his way to the kitchen, nodding at the carafe on the counter. He's got a child on his hip, held away from the hot stove as he flips a pancake. Another one is perched on the counter, chomping away at a strip of bacon.

"Oh my God," Dick whispers. "It's genetic."

Jason looks away from the griddle to scowl at him. "B and I don't share any genes, you moron."

Dick just shakes his head slowly. "Oh my God."

"Make yourself useful and warm up some syrup," Jason orders. "Top shelf of the fridge."

"Stove or microwave?"

"Microwave's fine."

Dick nods, pulling out the bottle of expensive maple syrup along with some cream for his coffee.

"Hi," says the girl perched on the counter. "Bacon?"

"Thanks," Dick says, accepting the offering. "What's your name?"

"I'm Lina," the girl says.

"Okay," Dick says, nodding. "Right. Lina. I'm Dick."

"Hi, Dick," she says, then turns back to her bacon. One of the boys climbs up to join her on the counter, tiny toes easily finding purchase on the lower cabinet doors.

The microwave beeps and he takes out the syrup, then steps over to Jason and leans casually against the counter, sipping at his coffee.

"So," he says carefully. "Are they…you know…"

"Spit it out, Dick," Jason says distractedly.

"…Yours?"

Silence. Jason sets down the spatula and turns towards Dick, disbelief

painted all over his face.

“Not yours, then,” Dick says, relieved.

“Are you fu—forking serious right now, Grayson?”

“Well, you know,” Dick fumbles.

“What, you think all the Latinos in the Alley are related?”

“No! I just—They’re young enough. It’s *possible*. I mean—”

“They’re *toddlers*,” Jason says. “I would’ve been a *teen dad*.”

“You could’ve adopted!”

“When, *exactly,* would I have had time to adopt *four children*, Dick?!”

“Well, I don’t know! I don’t know everything about your life! I was trying not to assume!”

“Oh my God,” Jason swears, turning back to his pancakes. He starts laughing. “Oh my *God*.”

Dick pouts. “It’s not that unlikely!”

Jason just keeps laughing. The kid on his hip is laughing, too, thumb still in his mouth.

Finally, Jason pulls himself together, wiping his eyes and says: “This is Danny. That’s Milo and Lina on the counter. Beto’s… in the living room? Beto!”

“What?” the boy calls from somewhere else in the apartment.

“What are you doing?”

“Nothing!”

Jason closes his eyes like he’s praying. “Come back in here!”

He appears a moment later. “Where do the stairs go?”

“The roof,” Jason answers.

All four kids immediately erupt in variations of ‘that’s so cool!’

“Can we go up there, Jay?” Beto asks.

“After breakfast.”

Cheers fill the kitchen.

Jason huffs a laugh. “They’re the neighbor’s kids,” he explains. “I went over to borrow some baking powder and…” He shrugs.

Oh my God.

“Triplets?” he asks.

Jason nods. “Yeah, the—”

“Quadlets,” Danny argues.

“Quad*rup*lets,” Milo corrects scornfully. “Not *quadlets*.”

“Whatever,” Danny huffs.

“Wait, really?” Jason says, brows raised. “Lina, I thought you were older?”

The little girl puffs up with pride. “I’m just the biggest.”

The boys collectively groan.

“Not for long,” Milo grumbles. “I’m going to have a spurt soon.”

“Wow,” Dick says. “*Quadruplets*.”

“I know, right? Eliana’s gotta be a meta or something. I don’t know how she does this every day.” He scoops up the last of the pancakes and flips the stove off one handed, then somehow manages to shuffle the pancake platter, bacon, syrup, butter, and whipped cream all into his arms without setting Danny down. “Okay, kids! Time to eat. Proceed to the table!”

Doesn’t know how she does it, Dick’s award-winning ass. Jason seems to be doing just fine.

“Dick, can you grab my coffee?”

Dick grabs the cup dutifully, following the trail of children to the table.

“Where did you get *booster seats*?” he asks, baffled.

“What?” Jason says, slicing plates of pancakes almost too fast for Dick’s eye to track. “Oh. I brought them over from Eliana’s. She gave me her keys.”

She gave him her keys. And her quadruplets.

“Orange juice or milk?” Jason asks the kids, then sweeps out of the room to fill the orders.

Dick goes to make himself a plate of pancakes, only to find there’s one already sitting in front of him, buttered and sliced and covered in syrup and a whipped cream smiley face, with bacon on the side.

“Oh my God,” he says.

“I wish Jason was *my* big brother,” Milo complains to him. “You’re so lucky.”

“No, no, no,” Dick protests. “Jason’s my *little* brother.”

The kids look at him with identical expressions of skepticism.

“He is!” Dick insists. “Jason! Tell them I’m older than you!”

Jason laughs from the kitchen, loud and deep. The sound of it makes Dick so happy he could burst.

“Yeah,” Jason says, reappearing with all four glasses and distributing them to the correct children. “Dickie here is an old man. He’s *twenty-six*.”

The kids all gasp on cue.

“Jason,” Dick whines.

“You must be so wise,” Milo says solemnly.

Dick sputters.

“If you marry Mami,” Beto says, a thoughtful expression on his tiny face. “Jay would be our uncle.”

“You should marry Mami,” Lina agrees immediately.

Jason’s laughing so hard he’s wheezing.

“I’m not marrying anyone!” Dick denies. “Why me and not Jason?”

“I already asked,” Milo says seriously. “She said Jason is ‘a very nice boy’ but ‘also a baby,’ so she can’t date him.”

“But if you’re the *older* brother…” Lina says, mouth stuffed full of pancake.

“Then maybe she would say yes!” Danny finishes.

“*Oh my God*,” Dick says, head in his hands.

“Okay, okay,” Jason intervenes, grinning from ear to ear. “You’ve had your fun, kids. Let’s lay off the marriage topic for a bit.”

The kids take the change of subject in stride, only grumbling a little.

“Do you have other siblings?” Beto asks. “We have another sister, Mari. She’s six.”

“She’s at school!” Milo says with a kind of reverence Dick has never in his life felt for educational institutions.

Beto nods impatiently, shoveling a forkful of pancake into his mouth. “Yeah, cool, school. Do you have other siblings?”

“Well, Dickie here’s the oldest,” Jason starts. “Then Cass, who’s the only girl, then me, then Tim, then Damian.”

“Five!” Lina yells. “We match!”

Jason chuckles. “Yeah, I guess we do, mija.”

“How old is your littlest brother?” Danny asks.

“Um.” Jason glances at Dick, floundering a little.

“Dami’s twelve,” Dick answers for him, smiling a little sadly at Jason.

The kids groan. “No little kids?”

“My goddaughter’s seven,” Jason offers. “She stays here on weekends.”

“Seven is still old,” Danny huffs.

Dick laughs a little.

“Jason, can I have more pancakes?” Milo asks.

“Sure, mijo,” Jason says. “How many?”

Jason busies himself fixing seconds for all the kids and refilling glasses of juice and milk. Dick eats his breakfast and watches, a little starstruck.

“What?” Jason says when he notices Dick’s gaze, sounding a little self-conscious.

“Nothing,” Dick says, smiling. “You’re just really good with them.”

Jason huffs, flushing a little and Dick, not wanting to push when the fact that Jason is talking to him at all, much less letting him sleep on his couch and eat his food, lets it go.

“Can we go on the roof now, Jay?” Beto asks when they’re all done.

“After everybody clears their plates and washes their hands and faces, sure.”

The kids cheer, scrambling down from their chairs and carting their sticky plates to the kitchen.

“I can wash up,” Dick offers.

“Thanks,” Jason says, looking a little frazzled for the first time all morning.

“No problem, little wing. Thanks for breakfast.”

Jason smiles at him, small and a little timid, but *real*. He opens his mouth to say something—

And is immediately nearly bowled over by Danny launching himself into his legs.

“Jeez, kid,” he complains, hefting him up onto his hip. “A little warning next time.”

Danny just laughs around his thumb. “Roof!”

“Roof! Roof! Roof!”

“Okay, okay, you little hellions. Let’s go. Ground rules! 1) Do not go near the edge. 2) No running. 3) No pushing or rough housing. 4) If I tell you to move away from something or go back downstairs, you do it immediately, no questions asked, okay?”

“Okay!” the kids chorus back, already clomping up the stairs.

“Okay. Repeat them back. Rule 1?”

Dick laughs under his breath, retreating to the kitchen to start on the dishes. He shoots a quick text to Stephanie, making sure she didn’t have any problems overnight and Damian got to school alright.

*All good here boss,* she sends back. *Hows Jason?*

*Jasons good,* he replies. *Making him watch airbender he somehow missed it*

*OH MY GOD,* Steph says, accompanied by a string of shocked face emojis.

*Ikr? Gtg wash a bunch of toddlers breakfast dishes talk later*

*Um WHAT???* Steph replies, but Dick just pockets his phone and gets to work. Who knows how long the roof will keep the kids occupied.

# Chapter 2

Chapter Summary

> The more time Jason spends out on the streets, the more he realizes that Dick wasn't just being humble when he said Crime Alley had mostly taken care of itself while Jason was gone.
>
> The Alley is *safe* in a way it never really has been before. Not since before Jason was born, anyway. People watch out for each other, now. They stop shit in the streets before it starts.

Chapter Notes

> That was, uh. A longer wait than I meant it to be.

See the end of the chapter for more notes

The more time Jason spends out on the streets, the more he realizes that Dick wasn't just being humble when he said Crime Alley had mostly taken care of itself while Jason was gone.

The Alley is *safe* in a way it never really has been before. Not since before Jason was born, anyway. People watch out for each other, now. They stop shit in the streets before it starts.

The vast majority of the criminals left are the desperate kind, just trying to come up with enough money to feed their families, and Jason spends more time handing out meal replacement bars and hundred-dollar bills than anything else.

He still follows his patrol route diligently, but most nights, like this one, are quiet. He stops a couple muggings without even throwing a punch, breaks the wrist of a guy holding up a bodega and then regrets it when he realizes how skinny the guy is.

The store owner is easily convinced not to call the cops, probably wouldn't have anyway, and Jason ends up escorting the would-be robber to Leslie's clinic to get his wrist casted, before buying him a hot meal and pointing him in the direction of a reputable homeless shelter with the last of the cash Jason has on him in the guy's pocket.

Just before Jason's about to head home for the night, he spots a

scuffle in an alley behind a club and drops down into a deep shadow, ready to bust heads. Only to stop, confused, and squint at the scene.

“You think it’s okay to put something in a girl’s drink like that, huh? You think that’s fucking funny?”

“N—no.” The guy the group is surrounding barely manages to get the words out. He’s bleeding, just a little. It looks like they broke his nose.

“That’s right,” the leader of the circle says. “It’s not fucking funny. It’s not fucking *acceptable*.”

The door to the club opens, music and light spilling out into the alley.

“Found her friends,” a guy in the doorway says. “They’re taking her —”

Then his eyes land on Jason’s previously well-shadowed corner, now bathed in light.

“Holy shit,” Door Guy breathes, eyes as wide as dinner plates, and points.

The whole group turns.

Jason sighs internally.

Externally, he steps closer to the group, rests one hand casually on the grip of his gun, and says: “Evening, gentlemen. Wanna tell me what’s going on here?”

Door Guy steps into the alley and closes the door, cutting off the source of the light. He’s young, but apparently graying early. Not salt-and-pepper style, just a wide streak over his forehead.

“Um,” he says.

“We were just—”

“Johnny saw him spike this girl’s drink, so—”

“Mr. Red Hood, sir—”

“—trying to help out, I—”

“Glad to see you back, man!”

"—got to say, it is an *honor*—"

Jason holds up a hand. "Shut up."

Silence.

"You," Jason says, pointing to the one who was talking when he dropped into the alley. Weirdly enough, the guy also has a chunk of silver in his hair, even though he can't be much older than Jason. Is all the fear toxin exposure in the Alley making everyone age prematurely or something? "Tell me what happened."

"Alright," the guy says, a little nervous. "We were just in the club. And I saw this asshole," he gestures to the man on the ground behind him, "slipping something into a girl's drink at the bar. So, me and Pete grabbed him and hauled him out here and Tommy stayed to take care of the girl."

Jason points at Door Guy. "That's Tommy?"

"Yeah," Door Guy says. "I'm Tommy."

"And who are the rest of you?"

They all start tripping over themselves to tell him their names and Jason realizes he already knows all but two them. He went to grade school with the ringleader, Johnny. Tommy used to live on his block when they were kids. Three of the others are guys who used to work for him, and one is a guy he broke the ribs of a few years back, when the guy was working for *Black Mask*.

Over half of them have chunks of the front of their hair that are*not* graying like he originally thought but are *bleached white*.

To match Jason's.

He doesn't know what the fuck to do with that.

"What's your plan here, exactly?" Jason asks.

"Rough him up a bit," Johnny says. He seems to be the leader. "Then take his picture and send it to the—to the rest of us. So we can keep an eye out."

"The rest of you?"

"Yeah." Johnny's clearly a little nervous about it, but he's not backing

down. “The Red Hoods.”

Jason just stares at him for a minute. “Well, alright,” he says finally. “Carry on.”

He disappears back into the shadows and watches from the roof as they do exactly what they said they were going to.

Spoiler arrives just as they’re pushing the perp out into the street and telling him to *run*.

“Ah,” she says. “I see you’ve met your fan club.”

“What the fuck,” Jason says. “What the *actual* fuck.”

Blondie just laughs.

“You know one of those guys used to be muscle for Sionis, right?”

“No,” she says. “But it doesn’t surprise me. He and the rest have lost serious numbers to the Red Hoods. You notice the hair?”

Yes, he noticed the fucking hair. “When the hell did this start?” he asks, ignoring the question.

“Eh, hard to say. They were pretty small time for a while. Pretty sure they started up during or right after the riots.”

“Riots?” Jason asks, feeling like he’s having some sort of strange dream. Maybe a hallucination. “What riots?”

“Oh, the Alley collectively lost its *shit* when B ran you out,” she says. “Didn’t get televised, obviously, ‘cause when was the last time you saw a reporter braving the Alley? But it happened. People were pissed. I guess someone got it in their head to watch over the neighborhood in your absence. By the time I started patrolling here, there were already a dozen or so, but I’m pretty sure the first one was the leader of the group that was just down there, John Sheehan.”

Jason shakes his head a little in disbelief. “We went to kindergarten together,” he says. “He made fun of me for crying when I fell off the swings.”

Spoiler laughs.

Jason shoves her a little. She just laughs harder.

“Not funny,” he grumbles.

“Pretty funny.”

There’s a beat of silence, then Jason says: “They don’t know what they’re getting themselves into.”

Steph shrugs. “Yeah, maybe. But they’re all big boys. They can make their own decisions.”

Jason grunts quietly, then falls silent, not sure yet how to feel about it. It’s a lot to process.

The two of them sit there for a while, watching the streets they grew up on, then Jason breaks the silence.

“Waffles?”

“Oh, God, yes,” Steph says. “Where do you even get them from? I swear, I’ve been to every waffle house in Gotham and I’m *still looking.*”

Jason’s glad he’s still wearing the hood because his cheeks are definitely a little warm.

“What,” he scoffs, standing up, “you thought I *bought* those?”

“Oh my God,” Steph says, eyes widening. “Are you saying the best waffle house in Gotham is *your* house?”

“I guess you’ll have to find out. Race you there?”

“Fuck,” Steph swears, scrambling to her feet as he starts running. “I don’t even know where I’m going!”

Jason laughs.

“You absolute *ass*!” she yells after him, and the race is on.

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If you asked him, he’d deny it, but he goes to hang out with the working girls the next night because he’s bored, not because he really needs information. Mostly because he’s bored, anyway. He also figures

he should re-establish a presence. Make sure the johns know he's back and paying attention.

"Smoke?" Jess asks when he drops down from the fire escape, holding out a pack of cigarettes.

He's not surprised that she's not surprised. She's not really one to be phased, and he's been spotted lurking around the area enough in the last few weeks she must've already known he was in town, even if he's only now coming to see her.

She shakes the pack of cigs at him a little for emphasis. Jason pulls his helmet off and takes one. He lights up, then scrubs a hand over his scalp to try to minimize the helmet head.

"Thanks."

Jess waves him off easily. She looks a little older than she did the last time he saw her, but not much. She should be in college or something, but that's true for half the boys and girls working the street corners.

A john walks up a few yards down, glancing nervously at Jason before smiling at one of the newer boys, one Jason doesn't know yet. The john doesn't look like he's going to be a problem, but Jason makes sure he can tell he's watching him anyway. The guy glances at him once, gulping a little.

Good.

Better that he stays a little afraid. Better that he doesn't get any ideas.

"How's business?" he asks as the john heads inside the building Jason bought for exactly that purpose a few years back. The boy he chose follows behind without any visible fear.

A regular, probably. One that's not an asshole.

"Business is slow," Jess says. "Everyone's a little jumpier knowing you're back."

"Anyone I need to worry about?"

Jess shakes her head. "Things got a little tense after you first left, but it's settled down since then. Your fan club's been taking care of problems when they crop up."

Jason grunts a little, skeptical.

“You killed all the worst pimps,” Jess points out. “The only major player left is Black Mask, and he’s decided to stick to easier prey.”

“For now.”

Roman won’t stay content with the Narrows for long. He’ll get greedy sooner or later, just like he always does, and come back to the Alley looking for trouble. Jason’s not nearly enough of an optimist to think different.

“For now,” Jess agrees. “At least you’ll have back-up when the time comes.”

Jason scowls a little, taking another drag. “They’re going to get themselves killed.”

“Maybe. But Johnny and his boys are careful. They watch each other’s backs. To be honest,” Jess side-eyes him a little, “I’m a little more worried about you.”

Jason brushes her off. “Thanks, but not necessary. I’m doing fine.”

“Right,” she scoffs. “Why’d it take you so long to come back after the Bat ran you off, then? I thought you didn’t let him boss you around.”

Jason takes a long drag from the cigarette, trying to figure out what to say.

“It’s complicated,” he says eventually. “I would’ve come back sooner if I could have.”

“You think I don’t know that?” she says. “The whole Alley knew he must’ve had something big over you, to keep you away.” She smokes for a minute, watching him, then adds: “Some folks say he’s your daddy.”

Jason glares at her half-heartedly.

“What?” she says. “I’ve got three-quarters of a psychology degree. We can talk about it if you want.”

“Three-quarters?”

“Don’t change the subject.”

Jason takes another drag. Scowls a little. “Yeah,” he says finally. “He’s my dad. Closest I’ve got, anyway.”

“He’s the one who kicked the shit out of you, yeah?”

He doesn’t remember it, but Roy says Jess and the others probably saved his life, that night. Got him and Roy out of the city before Jason could bleed out or seize bad enough to turn his brain to mush or whatever.

She deserves the truth, probably, so Jason grunts an affirmative.

Around a lungful of smoke, she makes an obvious sound of disgust. “If he shows his stupid little ears around here, he’ll regret it. I’ve got pointy knees.”

Surprised and a little delighted, Jason laughs out loud.

“What, you don’t think I’m serious?” she huffs.

“No, I know you are,” he says. “That’s why it’s funny.”

Bruce would have no clue how to handle a random woman just walking up and kneeing him in the balls. He’d be so fucking confused. Jason has no idea what he’d do. Probably just disappear into the nearest shadow and never speak of it again.

“Thanks for the offer. Really. But I don’t think you’re going to be seeing him any time soon.”

Jess’s lips purse a little. “Those retirement rumors true, then?”

“Don’t spread it around, but yeah. Guessing some poor schmuck is going to get stuck with the mantle eventually, but it doesn’t look like they’ve worked it out yet.”

Jess hums. “Got any bets?”

“Not really. Maybe Black Bat, she’s probably the best choice.”

“You don’t think they’re going to try to hide it?”

“Nah,” Jason says honestly. “Not in the cards.”

“What about the last guy who had it? Wasn’t that Nightwing?”

“Nightwing’s staying Nightwing.” Dick will only be Batman again over Jason’s dead body. “No bat ears in his future.”

Jess puts out the butt of her cigarette on the trash can in front of them

and throws it out. Jason takes the last drag of his.

“Well, I hope whoever ends up with it actually gives a shit about the Alley for a change,” Jess says. “Might be nice.”

Jason huffs, disposing of his cigarette butt and slipping his helmet back on. “What? I’m not good enough for you anymore?”

“Fuck you,” Jess says, smacking him on the arm. “You know what I meant.”

“Yeah, yeah,” Jason says, already stepping back into the shadows. “Make sure to—”

“Call if I need you,” she finishes for him, pulling out the burner phone he gave her years ago and waving it a little. “You think I’m stupid enough not to?”

Jason just laughs, already halfway up to the roof.

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He’s woken up the next morning not by the calming music of his alarm gradually increasing in volume but by a blaring ringtone he doesn’t recognize.

He snaps immediately to full alert, then sags back into the mattress, groaning a little.

It’s just his phone. The sound it’s making is horrific, only mostly due to the hour, and he sure to God never would’ve set his ringtone to it, but he let Lina play some game on it the other day, so who knows what all she changed.

Kids.

“’Lo?” he says, answering it with his eyes closed, half his face pressed into his pillow.

There’s a pregnant pause, then: “Did I wake you up?”

Jason sits up.

“Replacement,” he says. “What’s wrong? Is Dick—”

“No,” Tim says hurriedly. “No, nothing’s wrong. I didn’t realize how early it was. I can call back?”

“I’m already up.”

“Okay,” Tim says, a little dubious. “Dick mentioned you’ve been trying to get the street kids a place to stay for winter?”

“Uh, yeah.”

“I think I can help, if you’re interested.”

“Hit me, kid,” Jason says, already getting out of bed and grabbing a pen and notepad.

“The Martha Wayne Foundation used to have four orphanages across the city. They’ve been closed for years now, but the buildings are in good condition. I can get the funding to refurbish and reopen them if you can convince the kids to come in.”

Jason chews on his lip for a second. It won’t be easy. The kids are skittish when you’re not asking them to do anything at all. But if it’s that or face as cold a winter as it looks like this one’s going to be without reliable shelter?

“I can try,” Jason says. “What about the staff?”

“I can handle the hiring.”

“I want to vet everyone myself,” Jason says. “Independently.”

Tim’s quiet for a minute, then says: “Alright. We can make that happen.”

“How much space do you have?”

“How many kids are there?”

Hard to say. “About a hundred,” Jason guesses. “Maybe more. I’ll try to get a headcount. Not all of them are going to be able to come in, though. Even if it’s safe.”

“What? Why not?”

“They’re runaways, not orphans. The cops will make them go home.”

“What if you talk to the commissioner?”

Jason snorts. “I’m not exactly on his Christmas card list, Tim.”

There’s a beat of silence, then: “…I’ll talk to him. See what we can do.”

Good. That’s—

That’s good. Having Gordon on their side would be a game changer.

“Thanks,” Jason says, gruff, but honest.

“No problem. It’s for the kids, right?”

Yeah.

“We’ll have to put together a proposal for the foundation, do you want to meet up on Saturday to start working on it?”

“Yeah, Saturday works for me.”

“Cool,” Tim says, a little awkwardly. “Just text me a time and place. I’ll be there.”

“Alright.”

“Cool. Uh. Bye?”

Jason hangs up the phone. He stares at it for a second, then huffs a little laugh, shaking his head.

Definitely not how he was expecting his morning to go.

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Jason reduces his patrol hours, leaving Johnny Sheehan’s Red Hoods to take care of most of the petty crime. They do a good job of it, and there’s value to their bare faces. They hold people accountable in a way that Jason just can’t if he wants to maintain any sort of anonymity. Once, he hears them threaten to tell a kid’s grandma on them for skipping school. The look of despair on the kid’s face is *priceless*.

Instead of running along the rooftops, Jason takes to seeking out the street kids, passing out coats and shoes and food and trying to get that head count for Tim.

There are so many of them. Too many of them.

It gets colder and colder every day, and Jason can't stop himself from wondering how many of them are going to be at risk of freezing to death if he and Tim can't get those old orphanages up and running before the next cold snap.

Jess calls him a few nights after they spoke, nearly giving him a heart attack, but it's for a different kind of emergency than he's expecting, and he ends up referring her to 'this guy Jason' and babysitting one of the other working girl's eighteen-month-olds. The cover is paper thin but, fuck it, Jess isn't going to rat him out. He's pretty sure she saw his face anyway, that night he shot Penguin.

He thought it would be a one-off, but word gets around quick of a Red Hood-vetted emergency babysitter, and soon he's picking kids up every other night from the dressing rooms of strip clubs and the kitchens of shitty diners.

He doesn't mind. He'd rather they call him then leave their kid alone or risk losing their jobs over bringing them along. Fifteen years ago, he was that unsupervised little kid coloring in the corner booth, after all.

Dick is continually horrified by this.

"Is that *another* one?"

He's perched on the banister of the roof access stairs, eying the baby in Jason's arms like they're an armed bomb.

Jason rolls his eyes. "This is Darius. He's Jada's."

Dick crouches lower on the banister, peering at the kid. How the hell he's managing to stay there without sliding down, Jason has no idea. Some sort of grips on the soles of his boots, maybe?

"Who's Jada?"

"She works at the café on Lincoln. Got called in with practically no notice for a shift." Jason bounces the baby a little, making him giggle. "Would you get down from there? You look like a fucking cryptid."

Dick complies by sliding down the railing gracefully, flipping in a tight triple somersault before landing.

“Fucking showoff,” Jason scoffs.

Dick just grins, preening a little. He probably deserves to. It was a nice flip.

“Got any food?” he asks.

“Wait your turn. Have to feed the baby first.”

Groaning dramatically, Dick sprawls across the couch.

“The smaller baby,” Jason adds dryly.

“Jay,” Dick complains, dragging out the syllable. “Don’t be mean. I’m starving.”

Jason rolls his eyes. “Sit up then.”

“What?”

“Sit up,” Jason insists, kicking at his shins until he obeys, then leaning down to deposit Darius in his arms. Dick makes some alarmed noises, but he lets Jason manhandle him into place. “Here, keep his head in the crook of your—just there. Yeah.”

“Hi,” Dick says, soft and a little awkward and seemingly transfixed by Darius’s huge brown eyes looking up at him. “Hi.”

Jason goes to the kitchen and starts warming up a bottle of formula, testing the temperature carefully before bringing it to Dick.

“Here.”

“You want me to…?”

“Feed him?” Jason asks, brows raised. “Yeah, moron. That’s what the bottle is for.”

“I—Jay, I don’t—”

“You’re fine,” Jason brushes him off. “Here. Just hold the bottle like this, and keep his head supported, and—There you go.”

Darius starts sucking the formula down like a pro, and Dick’s nervous

expression shifts into something like awe.

“Cute, huh?’

“Yeah,” Dick says quietly, eyes fixed on the baby’s face. “He’s so peaceful.”

“He’s an easy baby,” Jason agrees. “Sit tight. I’ll go make some dinner.”

Back in the kitchen, he pulls out some sauce he made the night before and pours some into a saucepan to heat up, starting some water for pasta in another.

“Chicken or salmon in your pasta?” he calls over his shoulder.

“Uh, salmon?”

Salmon it is. He starts it cooking in a pan, then chops and seasons some asparagus and throws it in the oven to roast.

In the living room, Darius starts crying.

“Jay?”

“Did he finish the bottle?”

“Yeah, and he is *not* happy about it!”

Still hungry, then. Jason warms up another bottle and takes it to the living room.

“Shh,” Dick soothes a little desperately. “It’s okay, you’re okay.”

Darius *wails*.

“Oh, God.” Dick attempts to rock him, but that just makes him cry harder.

“Here,” Jason says, taking pity on him and reaching out for the baby. “He’s probably still hungry, but we need to burp him first.”

“We need to *what*?”

Jason just laughs at him and sets Darius up on his shoulder, cloth in place in case he spits up. He stops crying almost immediately and Dick huffs a little.

“Jason Todd, the baby whisperer,” he says. “Who knew?”

“It’s not like it’s hard,” Jason says. “It’s like, four skills. And a lot of repetition.”

Dick scoffs a little, but…fondly? Jason lets it go. When the timer for the salmon goes off, he passes Darius back and hands Dick the fresh bottle.

“When he’s done, just do what I did.”

Dick eyes the spit-up cloth warily, but nods, and Jason goes to finish dinner. By the time everything’s ready and plated, Darius is sound asleep on Dick’s shoulder.

“I got him,” Jason says, smiling a little as he eases the baby out of Dick’s arms and onto his own shoulder. “Food’s on the table.”

“Jesus, Jay,” Dick swears, taking his seat. “This is like, fancy Italian restaurant shit.”

Jason rolls his eyes. “It’s just pasta.”

“Just pasta,” Dick mocks around a mouthful of linguine. “Seriously, where did you learn how to make this?”

Well, a Michelin starred chef in Little Italy, but he’s not going to tell Dick that.

“Just because you can’t make anything more complicated than a bowl of cereal doesn’t mean we’re all inept.”

Dick grumbles a bit but lets it go, and they talk about patrol and Dick’s cases while Jason eats his pasta one-handed, holding the sleeping baby against his shoulder with his left arm.

The conversation strays to Alfred somehow and Jason finishes his last few bites in silence.

“He would love to see you,” Dick says carefully.

Jason chews his last bite slowly. Takes a sip of water. Finally, he says: “I won’t go to the Manor.”

“That’s fine,” Dick assures him. “He’d—I’m sure he’d be happy to come here.”

Jason grunts a little, suddenly self-conscious about the dingy walls and shitty furniture. Maybe he should try to fix the place up a bit.

“Or you could go out? Get lunch or something?”

“Nah,” Jason says. “That’s okay. He can come here if he wants.”

“Perfect,” Dick says, obviously relieved. “Can I give him your number?”

“Yeah, sure.” There’s a slip of paper tucked into one of the books on Jason’s shelf with Alfred’s number written on it in the old man’s loopy handwriting. Roy gave it to him after—

Well, after. But he’s never used it.

“He—” Jason swallows. “He’s not, uh…”

*He’s not mad at me?*

That’s what Jason wants to ask, but it’s so fucking stupid he can’t say it out loud.

Dick seems to get it anyway, the stupid mindreading asshole.

“You didn’t see him after the meeting,” he says. “He was…*angry* doesn’t begin to describe it. He was furious with Bruce. I think he would’ve kicked him right out of the house if he hadn’t owned up to it like he did. Bruce, he’s—he’s been going to therapy. I don’t know if anyone’s told you that. He’s really been trying to change.”

No idea what to say to that, Jason just stays silent, shifting Darius in his arms a bit.

“Sorry,” Dick says. “I’m—We weren’t going to talk about him. I’m sorry. Forget it.”

Jason scoffs a little, brushing him off. “It’s fine.”

There’s another long moment of silence.

“I don’t know if it’s something I can get over,” Jason says quietly, honestly. “I just—I ignored it for so long, you know? Just pushed it down and—and told myself it was my fault, or that he didn’t mean it, or…And once I stopped, once I got a little distance and looked at it, the whole fucking *mess*, I just—”

He shrugs a little helplessly, eyes fixed on the table, picking at the peeling varnish.

“I know he’s trying. If it were last year, or the year before, I would’ve —” He laughs a little, self-deprecating. “I would’ve been begging at the door for any scraps he would throw me. But I—it’s different, now. I don’t know.”

“Little wing,” Dick says, all emotional and shit. “You don’t owe him anything. You don’t have to see him if you don’t want to, no matter how hard he’s trying to make it right. That’s your decision, and none of us, not me, not Alfred, not any of the kids, are going to judge you for that. If anyone does, tell me, and I’ll beat the shit out of them for you.”

Startled, Jason jerks his gaze up to meet Dick’s big blue eyes. The older boy smiles.

“I’m serious. Big brother mode is fully engaged.”

Jason laughs, careful not to shift the baby too much.

Tension broken, Dick stands and gathers up the dishes. “Any chance you’ve got dessert?”

“Leech,” Jason accuses.

“If you’re trying to shame me into not eating your food,” Dick says, grinning, “you should know that shamelessness is one of my best and most-commented on traits.”

Jason rolls his eyes as he packs up Darius’s diaper bag. “There’s tiramisu in the fridge. Help yourself, I’m going to take Darius home.”

“You’re the *best*,” Dick manages around the huge bite already in his mouth. There’s whipped cream and cocoa powder stuck to his lip.

“Use a plate, you animal,” Jason complains, but he can’t help but smile as he closes the door behind him.

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He tosses and turns all night, thinking about what Dick said and how

Alfred might feel about everything, how he might react.

How much Jason wants to see him.

Eventually, he gives up on sleep and pulls out all his gear to clean and sharpen everything, but he can't stop checking his phone every few minutes.

By early afternoon, he's gotten so worked up about it, he figures he should just man up and call Alfred himself or he'll drive himself crazy.

The scrap of paper with Alfred's personal number on it is still tucked in between the pages of the copy of *The Odyssey* on his shelf.

The phone rings once, twice, and Jason almost hangs up, almost calls the whole thing off and then—

"Hello?"

"Uh," Jason says awkwardly. "Hi, Alfie."

"Master Jason," Alfred says at once. "My dear boy. It's good to hear your voice."

Jason ducks his head, throat suddenly tighter than it was a minute ago. "It's, uh. Good to hear your voice, too." He pauses for a moment, then adds: "I was talking to Dick last night and he, uh. He mentioned you might. Um. Have some time free. So, I thought maybe you could come over for tea? Or lunch. Or—anything really. If you—Just if you have the time. I'm sure you're busy and—"

"I would love to," Alfred interrupts gently. "When are you next available?"

"Um," Jason says. "I can—Does tonight work? Unless that's too soon. I can do tomorrow, too, or, um. Whenever, I guess, I don't really—Whenever."

"Tonight sounds lovely."

"Great." Jason runs a hand over his face, feeling a little lightheaded. "Great. I'll cook? I can make—I can make anything. Anything you want. What do you want?"

"I am sure whatever you would like to make for us is fine," Alfred says. "Is there anything I can bring? Dessert?"

“No, no, don’t worry about that,” Jason says, maybe a little too quickly. “I’ll make everything.”

“Alright. I suppose it will be nice to have a break from the kitchen.” There’s a pregnant pause. “How about I bring some wine from the cellar?”

“Sure. Um. Sure. That would be…nice. Thank you.”

“Of course. Red or white?”

Oh, shit. Um. He doesn’t—

“One of each, perhaps?”

“Yeah,” Jason exhales. “Yeah. That’s…that’s perfect. Is six-thirty alright?”

“That sounds wonderful.”

“Great. Great.”

“I will see you at six-thirty, then. Will you send me the address?”

“Yeah, I’ll text it to you.”

“Alright,” Alfred says. “Until tonight, then.”

“Yeah. Bye.”

Alfred hangs up, and Jason plops himself down on the couch, muscles loose with relief.

This is good. Dinner with Alfred. That’s—that’s good. He just needs to decide what to cook.

Fuck, what is he going to cook?

Something Alfred likes. What does Alfred like?

He doesn’t know. Fuck, he doesn’t know.

Maybe he could make something British? Beef Wellington, maybe?

Yeah. Yeah, Beef Wellington. He can roast some asparagus for the side, he’s still got some in the fridge. And, uh, cucumber soup for a starter. Sticky toffee pudding for dessert. With tea.

That'll work.

That'll work, but it's a *lot* of work. And he's got—he checks his watch—five hours.

Shit.

He pushes himself off the couch and grabs a piece of paper, jotting down a quick grocery list before pulling on his boots and heading down to his bike.

Less than an hour later, he's back at his building, paper grocery bag propped on his hip as he walks past Eliana's door and—

"Hey! It's Jason!"

"Hey, Danny," Jason says ruffling the kids hair as he steps out stocking-footed into the hall and is quickly followed by a passel of siblings. "And Beto, and Milo, and Lina, and Mari."

There's a chorus of greetings from the swarm of children tugging at his pantlegs.

"What's up, guys? Where you going?"

"Mari's parent-teacher conference," Eliana says, appearing in the doorway. "Come on, you rascals. Stop smothering Jason."

Jason grins. "Fun. I always loved those."

Mari huffs, rolling her eyes.

Eliana plops a hand on the girl's head. "I think you were a little more studious than our Mari, then."

"Yeah, I was I bit of a nerd," Jason admits. "You dropping the ferocious four off at your mom's?"

Eliana nods. "Unless you want some company?"

"YES!" Lina yells, practically climbing up Jason's leg.

"Can we, can we, can we?"

"Pleeeeeeaaaase?"

Jason laughs again, staggering a little as the others decide Lina's got

the right idea on the climbing thing.

“Sorry, kiddos,” he says, rubbing the back of his neck with his free hand. “I’ve got, uh. I’ve got plans tonight.”

The quadruplets collectively groan.

“Okay, you little monsters,” Eliana laughs. “Back inside! Shoes and coats!”

“Ugh, *Mami*,” Beto whines.

“Now. Chop, chop!”

There’s a lot of grumbling, but the kids all funnel back inside, muttering goodbyes to Jason.

“So,” Eliana says once they’re gone. “Good plans?”

Jason smiles. “Yeah.”

“Hot date?”

“No. Better,” Jason says honestly. “My, uh. My grandpa’s coming over for dinner.”

“Oh? Is he visiting?”

“No, he, uh. He lives nearby, but we haven’t been able to see each other much for a while now. So. Hopefully, it’ll—it’ll go well, you know? The situation’s kind of…complicated.”

“I’ll be wishing you luck, then,” Eliana tells him. “And feel free to come over after if it doesn’t go well, okay? Or if it does. Either way, you’re always welcome here.”

“Thank you.” Jason ducks his head a little. “Really.”

“Of course. Text me after so I know you’re okay?”

“Sure. Thanks, El.”

They say their goodbyes, and then Jason heads into his apartment and starts laying out ingredients, setting the oven to preheat, then chopping up the pancetta he just bought and getting it going in a pan before pulling out the tenderloin and bullying it into the right shape.

Then butter, mushrooms, and diced shallots in the pancetta pan, and sliced cucumbers, more diced shallots, salt and cayenne in another with some chicken stock he made last week to start the soup.

Then he's got to start on the sticky toffee pudding, or it will never be done on time, and he has to make the puff pastry and—

The afternoon flies by. The next thing he knows, the cucumber soup is thickened and ready to go, and the Wellington is in the oven, and the puddings are prepped for the oven, and he's got just enough time to frantically clean the kitchen and jump in the shower to try and make himself look presentable. He's still toweling off his hair when the buzzer goes off.

He nearly breaks his coffee table launching himself over the couch. After checking the camera, because he's a paranoid bastard even on a good day, he heads out the door and bounds down the stairs.

"Hi," he says a little breathlessly, ushering him inside. "Sorry, the buzzer is broken."

Alfred smiles. "Hello, Master Jason. It is wonderful to see you."

"You, too," Jason says, grinning. "Can I—here." He takes the two bottles of wine from Alfred and holds open the door. "I'm just up on the third floor."

"Perfect," Alfred says, starting up first flight.

Jason starts to follow but catches a glimpse of Eliana outside with the kids, trying to sweet talk the sticky lock into opening.

"Sorry," he says, "hold on one second," and jogs back down the stairs to get the door.

"Jason!" the kids all yell at once, save Milo, who's asleep in Eliana's arms.

"Whoa, easy," he laughs. "I've got breakables."

"Are you even old enough for alcohol?" Mari says scornfully.

"Wow," Jason says, rocking back a little with mock hurt. "Are you even old enough to know what grown-up juice is called?"

"Master Jason," Alfred scolds him lightly.

“What, Alfie? If she’s going to dish it out, she’s gotta learn how to take it,” he says, grinning as he ruffles Mari’s hair.

“Jason?” Eliana asks pointedly.

“Oh, jeez, yeah, sorry. Eliana, kids, this is Alfred Pennyworth, my, uh,” he glances at Alfred a little nervously, “my grandfather.”

“Hi, Jason’s abuelo!” Beto chirps.

“Alfred, this is my neighbor Eliana and her kids,” Jason says, stopping Beto from accosting Alfred with a hand on top of his head. “This is Beto, Sleeping Beauty there is Milo, then there’s Lina, Mari, and Danny, who’s a little shy.”

“Am not,” Danny whispers from where he’s hiding behind Jason’s legs, voice muffled by the thumb in his mouth.

“Hello, young ones,” Alfred says. “It is wonderful to meet you.”

“Why do you talk funny?” Beto asks plainly.

Eliana slaps a hand over her eyes.

“Well, young sir, I grew up a long way away from here, across the ocean in England.”

“Like Peppa Pig!” Lina says.

“Mami,” Danny whispers. “I need to go potty.”

“Oh-kay,” Eliana says. “Let’s get this show on the road, kids.”

“I need to go *bad*, Mami,” Danny insists. “I’m gonna pee myself.”

Eliana glances up the stairwell, then at the passel of children, groaning a little. “Jason, can you…?”

“’Course, El,” Jason says. “Let me just—”

“Here, Master Jason,” Alfred says. “I can carry the bottles.”

There’s a quick game of pass the baton, with Jason handing off the wine, then Eliana passing a limp Milo to Jason, and scooping up Danny in his place.

“Thanks, Jay,” she says, taking off up the stairs. “You’re a lifesaver!”

“Do you know the way?” Beto asks Alfred, grabbing the old man’s free hand and starting to tug him up the stairs. “I can show you. We live right next door to Jason, and sometimes he makes us pancakes and *one time* we met his brother, Dickie, do you know Dickie? He was silly and no good at cutting up pancakes, but he’s funny and he told us when we’re older that he’ll teach us how to do crazy flips like him! Can you believe that? I couldn’t believe that, but Jay said he wasn’t lying so I guess—”

“Why does the weird old guy call you ‘Master’?” Milo whispers, cracking one eye open to look at Jason. “Are you a Jedi?”

Jason tries not to laugh. “You little faker!” he whispers back. “Have you been awake this whole time?”

“Not faking,” Milo says. “Very sleepy.”

Jason pokes his forehead. “Faker.”

Milo pokes Jason’s cheek in retaliation.

“Jedi?” he asks hopefully.

“Nope, sorry, kid,” Jason says. “It’s just a fancy, old-fashioned way of referring to little kids.”

“You’re not little.”

“No,” Jason agrees. “But I was when I met Alfred, so.”

“Jason,” Lina whines when they get to the second-floor landing, holding up her arms in the universal ‘carry me’ position. “I’m *tired*.”

“No fair!” Beto says, cutting off his rambling to run back to Jason. “Pick me up, too!”

“You awake enough for shoulders?” Jason asks Milo. “You have to hold on tight.”

He nods enthusiastically, so Jason hoists him up over his head and onto his shoulders, then scoops Lina and Milo up and props them each on a hip.

Mari rolls her eyes at him. “Pushover.”

He sticks his tongue out at her.

When he glances at Alfred, the old man is looking at him with so much happiness in his eyes, Jason nearly drops a toddler in shock.

“Mari, you’re the scout!” Beto says, completely oblivious to Jason’s internal crisis. “You’ve got to lead!”

The eight-year-old rolls her eyes again but starts off up the stairs without comment.

“Mush!” Lina yells two inches from Jason’s ear, before kicking him impossibly gently with her little winter-booted feet.

Jason shoots a slightly unsure grin at Alfred and starts up the stairs.

“Mari pretends she doesn’t, but she likes being the scout,” Beto whispers to Alfred conspiratorially.

Sure enough, Mari reaches the top of the stairs and peeks around both corners theatrically before calling down an all-clear.

“Good scouting, kiddo,” Jason says when they join her at the top, nudging her with his knee since both his hands are full.

Mari grins up at him.

Eliana’s waiting at their door with Danny when they round the corner, and she immediately starts laughing at Jason. Jason just rolls his eyes at her. He doesn’t mind carrying the kids around. It’s not like they’re that heavy.

“You’re blinding him, Milo,” Eliana tells Milo, whose arms are wrapped around Jason’s forehead and, yes, a little bit over his eyes.

“Jay said to hold on tight,” Milo says, defensively.

Jason winces a little as the movement of the kid’s jaw makes his pointy little chin dig into his skull.

“Yep, I did,” he says. “Good job listening, buddy.”

Milo hums happily and kicks his heels against Jason’s chest.

“Alright, kiddos, time to disembark.”

He crouches down and lets go of Beto and Lina, then swings Milo down from his shoulders before going down on one knee in front of a pouting Danny.

“What’s wrong, mijo?” he asks.

“I want to ride on your head like Milo,” he mumbles.

Jason ruffles his hair. “Yeah? You’ve got dibs for next time then, okay?”

“Promise?”

“Promise.”

“Okay,” he says, taking his thumb out of his mouth to throw both arms around Jason’s neck in a hug. “Thanks, Jay. Don’t forget.”

“Not a chance,” Jason promises.

“Okay, come on, it’s dinner time,” Eliana says. “Everyone say your goodbyes and then get out of Jason’s hair.”

There’s a procession of children filing by for a hug goodbye, and then El says, low enough that the kids, already in the apartment, can’t hear: “Any chance you can take them on Monday? My mom’s got a doctor’s appointment.”

“Of course,” Jason agrees immediately. “Any time, El.”

Glancing over at Alfred, she says: “Your grandson is a very sweet boy, Mr. Pennyworth.”

Alfred smiles. “Yes, I’m very blessed to have him.”

Struck half dumb, Jason barely reacts to the kiss Eliana plants on his cheek before saying goodbye and heading inside her apartment.

“Sorry for the delay,” Jason says, snapping himself out of it with a shake of his head. “Are you hungry? Dinner’s almost ready.”

“It was no trouble,” Alfred says. “They seem like wonderful children.”

Jason huffs, unlocking his door. “They’re little maniacs, but yeah, they’re good kids.”

“They adore you.”

Jason shrugs awkwardly, ushering him inside. “I babysit sometimes.”

Seemingly sensing his discomfort, Alfred changes the subject. “What

did you decide on for dinner?"

"Oh, shit," Jason swears, suddenly remembering that the Beef Wellington is in the oven.

He launches himself over the couch again and into the kitchen, relaxing as soon as he sees the oven timer still ticking down.

"Sorry," he says. "Worried for a second there I burned dinner."

"Is that Beef Wellington I smell?" Alfred calls from the door.

"Yeah, I—"

Shit, his coat.

"Here," Jason says, hurrying back over. "Let me hang that up for you."

Alfred gives him an amused sort of look but plays along and lets Jason hang his coat up on one of the hooks by the door for him, then carry the bottles of wine into the kitchen.

"Cucumber soup?" Alfred asks, lifting the lid off the pot on the stove.

"Yeah."

"It smells wonderful."

Jason feels twenty pounds lighter after the words. For the first time all day, he really thinks this is going to be perfect. And then, standing at the counter, with the wine bottles in front of him, Jason realizes suddenly that there's something he entirely forget to account for.

"Master Jason," Alfred says gently. "Is there something I can help with?"

Jason shakes his head quickly. "No, no, there's—" His throat clenches tight, stealing the rest of the sentence, and Jason ducks his head a bit, hands gripping the edge of the counter too hard.

It was supposed to be perfect. He worked *so hard* for it to be perfect.

Alfred sets a hand on his shoulder. "What's wrong, dear boy?"

Screwing his eyes shut, he says quietly: "I don't have any wine glasses."

Alfred squeezes his shoulder lightly. “That’s quite alright. Any glass will do.”

Jason lifts one hand to cover his eyes. “I don’t have a corkscrew, either.”

“Well, that’s no problem,” Alfred says. “I brought my own.”

Surprised, Jason opens his eyes to see Alfred holding out a corkscrew with an expression so earnestly kind, Jason almost can’t take it.

“All I have is water glasses,” Jason says cautiously.

Alfred gives him a small smile. “I dare say it will taste the same no matter the glass, Master Jason. We will survive.”

Scrubbing at his face a little, Jason huffs a small laugh, and takes the corkscrew. “Okay,” he says. “Okay.”

Alfred squeezes his shoulder one more time, then goes to start ladling soup into the small bowls Jason set out before Jason shoos him away to sit at the set table.

He pours some of the white wine into the two nicest looking water glasses he can find and brings them over to the table with the bottle of red for when the beef is done, then makes up two bowls of soup and brings those to the table, too.

“Let me just take the Wellington out,” Jason says, running back to the kitchen quick to do just that, leaving it to rest.

When he comes back, Alfred is waiting patiently for him. He sits down. They start to eat.

“The soup is delicious, Master Jason. Thank you for cooking.”

Jason smiles. “Thanks for bringing the wine.”

“Of course,” Alfred says, lifting his glass for a sip.

“Alright?” Jason asks.

Alfred hums a little, considering the glass. “To be perfectly honest, Master Jason,” he says. “I haven’t enjoyed a glass of wine so much in years.”

Jason grins.

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*Went well,* he texts Eliana just before getting into bed, a stupid smile still tugging at the corners of his mouth. *Lmk what time on monday*

He’s asleep before she has a chance to text back.

Chapter End Notes

> Someday, I will actually finish the one-shot about Crime Alley's sex workers smuggling Jason and Roy out of Gotham right under Batman's nose and post it.
>
> Someday.

# Chapter 3

Chapter Summary

> Talia shows up in his apartment a few weeks later. He never told her he moved back to Gotham, but he's not surprised she knew. They haven't talked face to face in a few years, but Jason's always known she keeps tabs.
>
> "Tea?" he asks, dumping his armload of groceries on the counter.

Talia shows up in his apartment a few weeks later. He never told her he moved back to Gotham, but he's not surprised she knew. They haven't talked face to face in a few years, but Jason's always known she keeps tabs.

"Tea?" he asks, dumping his armload of groceries on the counter.

"Please," she says, not moving from her place on the couch. Her eyes are fixed on the tablet in her hands, probably filled with the latest battle plans or something. Her feud with Ra's has been raging for years now.

Jason rattles off the list of blends he has. She picks one. He makes two cups, not bothering to open another tin. If he didn't like it, he wouldn't have it in his cupboard. It's not like Dick or Steph or Eliana's kids drink a lot of tea. Alfred does, but Alfred has *taste*.

When he brings the cups over, Talia thanks him and sets down her tablet, but doesn't drink. Instead, she watches him sip his tea for a long moment.

"You look well," she says finally.

Jason shrugs. "Sure."

"Does the Pit still bother you?"

"Not much," Jason says honestly. He's had it under control for a long time now.

Talia just clicks her tongue, finally taking a sip of her tea.

"Up to your standards?" he asks, smiling a little.

“It will do,” Talia says, which he’s pretty sure means *yes*.

He rolls his eyes a little, but grins into his mug when he takes another sip.

“So,” he says. “You checking up on me or something?”

Talia taps her fingernails against the ceramic mug, and Jason wonders for a moment if something is wrong.

“My father is dead,” she says, and Jason chokes on his tea.

“What? Actually?”

Talia nods, taking another sip.

“You killed him?”

“Yes,” Talia says, face unreadable.

Jason nods, feeling a little unmoored. He never thought the creepy old bastard would ever actually kick the bucket. Even when Talia started going after him, he figured he’d squirm his way out of dying somehow.

“Are you, uh,” Jason says awkwardly, “okay? I know he was…”

“Our relationship was always complicated,” Talia says. “But I have been resigned to the necessity of his death for quite some time now. Any possibility of the two of us coexisting in harmony was gone the moment I found you in that cage.”

Jason stares at her. He thought—

He always thought she started going after Ra’s because of *Damian*. Not because of *him*.

She must be able to see surprise in his face.

“Surely you did not think I would forgive him for hurting you?”

Jason opens his mouth. Closes it again. He thinks of Talia’s rage when she found him, how she slaughtered at least a dozen men in that arena. The way she said his name, her hand gentle on his shoulder, carefully avoiding the split skin.

“Jason,” Talia says eyes intense. “I would not have forgiven him in a

thousand years for that. You are *mine*. My child, in every way that matters. Do you understand?"

Jason nods, speechless. He runs a hand over his face, blinking away the growing dampness of his eyes.

"If I did not make that clear," Talia says, sounding uncertain in a way Jason has never heard from her before, "I truly—"

Shaking his head sharply, Jason cuts her off. "No, this is…This is a me thing, I think. Roy says I have trouble…reading signals like that. Correctly. I, uh. Well. In hindsight, it's—you were pretty obvious."

"Not obvious enough," Talia disagrees. "I should have made sure you understood."

Jason doesn't know what to say to that, so he just takes a sip of his tea instead.

Talia, probably sensing his discomfort, lets him off the hook. "I visited Damian this morning."

"Yeah? How's the kid doing?"

"He is well," she says. "Living with Richard has made him…happy, I believe."

"Good." Jason nods. "That's good. He—he deserves to be happy. After everything."

"He does," Talia agrees. "So do you."

Jason groans a little. Apparently, Talia is *not* letting him off the hook.

"He informed me of what happened last year."

"Kid should mind his own fucking business," Jason says, a little harsher than he meant to.

He goes to make more tea, and Talia follows him into the kitchen, leaning gracefully against the counter.

"I will not force you to speak of it, if you do not wish to."

"I don't wish to," Jason says shortly.

Talia hums a little, noncommittal. "You are well, now?"

“Sure.”

She hums again, expectant, and Jason exhales audibly, hanging his head for a moment before turning around to face her.

“Honestly?”

Talia nods, eyes serious.

“I feel better than I have in years,” he says. “Maybe ever. There’s still —There are things I wish were different, sure. But the Pit is quiet, and I’m sleeping alright, and I’ve got people in my corner, so. Yeah, I’m happy.”

“Your archer,” Talia says. “He makes you happy?”

“Yeah,” Jason says. “He—”

Wait.

“You know we’re not together, right?”

“Of course.”

He hates how impossible to read Talia is sometimes.

“We’re not together,” he repeats. “Honestly. We’re just—He’s my best friend.”

“You know that I would not judge you for your preferences, yes?”

“Oh my God,” Jason groans. “No. I’m not—”

“Interested in men?”

“Interested in anything,” Jason says firmly. “Men or women or anyone. Not—not like that. Not right now anyway. I don’t know.”

“Alright,” Talia says easily, passing Jason her mug as the kettle starts to whistle. “He is a good friend, though, the archer?”

“The best.” Jason pulls the water off the stove and pulls out his teapot. Might as well, since it doesn’t seem like she’s planning on leaving anytime soon. “Saved my life.”

Talia makes a displeased sort of sound. “Your father—”

Jason shakes his head sharply. “We’re not talking about him. Anything else you want, but not Bruce.”

It takes a minute, but finally, Talia says: “Alright. How is Gotham?”

Jason hands her a fresh cup of tea and takes the pot and his own cup into the living room. He sits down on the couch, facing the door. Talia takes the armchair across the coffee table.

“She’s doing alright,” he says. “Crime is down in the Alley. Nightwing and Spoiler have been keeping an eye on things, but it’s mostly the people. They got a taste of what it’s like to have a bit of safety and liked it. Didn’t want to give it up.”

“I heard you have some copycats.”

Jason shakes his head. “Not copycats. Just…concerned citizens. Neighborhood watchmen. They don’t wear masks or anything.”

“Jason,” Talia says, a little chiding. “They dye white streaks in their hair to match yours.”

Jason does not *blush* because he doesn’t *do that*, but he ducks his head anyway, hiding behind his mug. “Makes me harder to ID,” he says. “They’re just trying to be helpful, you know?”

They both know people started doing that *after* he left. After it became apparent Batman had run him out of the city, after Crime Alley rioted for a week in protest. Some of the giant *Fuck Batman* graffiti is still up. Some of it is *new*. But Talia just quirks her lips at him, letting it slide.

“Anyway,” Jason says, clearing his throat. “The Alley doesn’t need as much work as it used to, so I’m…shifting focus a bit. Thinking about trying to clear out the foster system, but that’ll take a while, so. Trying to get the street kids safe places to live in the meantime.”

“A noble endeavor,” Talia says. “You always did have a soft spot for children.”

Jason shrugs, a little uncomfortable with praise from her. He knows she’s being more obvious on purpose, overcorrecting for him being fucking oblivious for all the years they’ve known each other.

“Have you spoken to Zahra and little Ashti recently?”

Jason frowns a little, shaking his head. “No. No, I—What do you

mean? I'm not—I'm not in contact with them."

Talia tilts her head slightly, gaze sharpening. "Did you not receive the information I sent once they were settled?"

"No. No—I mean, yes. I did. But you said you'd keep an eye on them, so I didn't—I don't—"

"Tt," Talia interrupts. "This is why Zahra is always asking after you, then?"

Jason stares, dumbfounded. "She—she asks about me?" he says, then realizes the full implications. "*You* stayed in contact with her?"

"Of course, I did," Talia huffs. "She was a young mother, nursing and malnourished, left alone in a country she had never been to before, after an incredibly traumatic experience at my father's hand. Their situation was precarious, and I was not about to abandon the child for whom you sacrificed yourself, body, mind, and soul."

Jason can't help but keep staring. He remembers, suddenly and with a rush of guilty shame, standing in that cage and thinking he had to convince Talia to bring them along, that she was going to leave them behind. Even the fucking *baby*.

Jesus, he's a shitty person.

"And of course she asks after you, Jason," Talia says, soft but a little exasperated. "Zahra refers to you her little brother. Ashti has grown up with stories of her *Xal Jason*, who shielded her from evil and delivered her to safety over the mountains. Why did you not stay in touch?"

"I thought," Jason says, voice a little thick. He can still feel the baby's downy hair under his palm, the rapid rhythm of her tiny heartbeats against his chest. "I thought—I didn't think she would want to see me."

Talia leans forward slowly, reaching out to hold his hands in hers. "Why did you think that, Jason?" she asks, eyes gentle. "I know she told you she considered you family."

Jason struggles to put it into words. "I—I just—She was scared and overwhelmed and sooner or later, she was going to realize that—that I wasn't—wasn't safe. To have around the baby."

“Jason, habibi,” Talia says, gripping his hands tightly. “You protected that child with everything you had. You gave your life for her, day after day, in the most painful ways possible. Ashti had never been safer in her life than when you held her against your chest.”

“I could’ve—I could’ve *killed her*, Talia,” Jason says, feeling a little helpless. “I—I killed so many others, just because they asked. And I—I fought it, in the beginning, like I did with the baby, but I gave in. I *gave in*, and I would’ve again, eventually. I would’ve—I could’ve—”

“But you did not,” Talia says firmly. “You did not kill her. You did not harm her at all.”

Jason shakes his head, eyes tightly closed. No. She doesn’t understand. She doesn’t *know*—She doesn’t—

“Is this because of the girl? The child they made you kill?”

Jason flinches, guilt and shame and *regret* clawing at his throat. He didn’t—he didn’t know she knew about that. He didn’t—He never told anyone about that. Not even Roy. He was too much of a fucking coward to see the look on the man’s face when he told him, too selfish to tell the goddamn truth and have to let Lian go. He wouldn’t hurt her, he would *never hurt her*, but how could Roy trust that, if he knew? How could anyone?

Talia stands, and for a moment, he thinks she’s leaving, another piece of family lost, and it’s his own fault, he expected it, even, but a great chasm opens inside his chest anyway.

But Talia doesn’t leave. She sits down next to him instead, pulling him into her arms and somehow managing to cradle him like a child, despite the fact that he’s a head taller and at least fifty pounds heavier than she is.

Whispering soothingly in Arabic, she sits on his couch and holds him like he hasn’t been held since before his mom died.

“I need you to listen to me, and listen well,” Talia says once he’s calmed down a bit. “That girl’s death was not your fault.”

Jason makes a low, wounded sound.

“Her blood is on my father’s hands, and on those of the men who meant to break you for him. It is not on yours.”

Jason presses his face deeper into her shoulder. He doesn't say anything.

"Habibi," Talia says softly. "It was not your fault. Alright? It was not your fault. Explain what happened to your archer and he will say the same, I am sure of it."

It's not that he doesn't understand that he—that he was *coerced*, he gets that. He knows that—that, legally, it's not murder if there's a gun to your head. But he can't—he can't help feeling like—like—

Talia sighs. "You ask too much of yourself, Jason. It is…unfortunate. Know that no matter how you feel about her death, I do not blame you. No one reasonable would."

Bruce would.

They both know it. It'd be pointless to say out loud, so neither of them do. It's just a fact.

They sit in silence for a long time, instead, then Jason finally pulls away.

"I'm just gonna," he says, gesturing to the bathroom, and goes to collect himself a bit. He splashes some water on his face. Faintly, he can hear Talia talking on the phone on the other side of the door. He stares at himself in the mirror for a few minutes while she finishes her call, and then after for a few minutes more.

Eventually, he works up the nerve to venture back out.

Talia looks up from her tablet when he emerges, a fresh cup of tea in her hands. Another is gently steaming on the coffee table. Jason sits down and picks it up, centering himself on the warmth of the mug under his hands, the steam in his nose.

"I have photographs of Ashti," Talia says. "If you would like to see them?"

Not trusting himself to speak, Jason nods.

Talia hands him her phone.

The little girl on the screen is older than Jason was expecting, somehow. He knows it's been years, but in his mind, she's still that tiny little thing, small enough Jason could cup her whole head in his

palm.

“She’s beautiful,” he says, voice hoarse, and it’s true. Her deep brown eyes are still much too big for her face, but they’re happy and bright. She’s laughing in the photo, smiling wide around a full set of baby teeth, dark curls tucked behind her ears.

He swipes through the handful of photos before going back to the first one and staring and staring, until a notification pops up on the screen.

It’s a text. From Zahra.

*I have plenty more if you need them*

And a moment later:

*Are they for Jason?*

Jason closes his eyes for a moment, then passes the phone back.

“Thank you.”

“Tt. Of course.” Talia looks at the phone for a moment and Jason realizes she’s probably reading the messages from Zahra. “Ashti’s birthday is this Tuesday.”

Jason swallows, not meeting her eyes.

“You would be welcome to visit,” Talia says. “I will send you the address.”

“Where—where do they live?”

“Metropolis.”

Metropolis. Next door, really. Just across the bay, and he didn’t even know.

“Does she really—” Jason cuts himself off. “Do you think it’s a good idea? For me to go?”

“Yes,” Talia says. “I do.”

Jason exhales roughly, running a hand though his hair. “I—maybe.”

“Alright. It’s your decision.”

They talk about small things for a while. Damian's art. How Jason should get a dog. Eliana's kids and Lian.

Talia pulls him into a hug before she leaves.

"Now that my father is gone," she says. "I will have a bit more time on my hands. Expect to see me more often."

Jason smiles a little, ducking his head as he nods.

"And Jason," she says, already out the door. "I am glad you are doing well. Please give my regards to your archer."

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"Is that a threat?" Roy says, voice a little high. "Is your scary ninja mom threatening me?"

"No!" Jason laughs. "At least, I don't think so."

"Oh my God," Roy moans. "I'm dead. I'm so dead."

Jason laughs harder. "Roy, she's not gonna come after you."

"She's *Talia al Ghul*," Roy says. "She's like, terror incarnate."

She is, really, but she'd never go after Roy. "Seriously. You're fine. She's just…grateful, I guess. That you've been in my corner these last few years."

Roy turns serious for a second, leaning in a little over the counter. "Jaybird, I'm *always* gonna be in your corner, you know that, right?"

Busying himself with the pasta sauce he's got simmering on the stove so he doesn't have to look the redhead in the eyes, he nods.

"Yeah, I know," he says quietly, and braves glancing up with a quick smile.

Roy smiles back.

"And you know I'm always in yours," Jason says.

“Yeah, buddy, I know.”

Turning back to the sauce, Jason nods awkwardly.

Roy makes a sort of cooing sound. “Look, baby bat’s showing his first *emotion*! So cute!”

Jason throws a green bean at him, but he just catches it in his mouth, laughing.

“Shut the fuck up,” Jason tells him. “And go get your spawn, dinner’s almost done.”

Roy gets up, but steps into the kitchen first to tug Jason against his side and plant a kiss on his cheek. “Aw, Jaybird, you know you love me.”

Jason grumbles under his breath but can’t help but smile as Roy heads out the door to get Lian from Eliana’s. He plates everything up before they get back, setting a glass of soda next to Roy’s plate and juice next to Lian’s.

“Jay!” Lian yells, throwing the door open. “Have you seen Mari’s new game yet? It’s so cool! You play as this guy with this big sword and—”

Jason doesn’t know a goddamn thing about video games, but he listens anyway, nodding and making appreciative noises when it seems appropriate. Roy is silently laughing at him the whole fucking time.

“—so good, thanks for dinner, can I go play with Mari now, dad?”

“Yeah, yeah, squirt, go on. Be back before ten!”

Lian’s out of the apartment in a flash and Roy starts laughing for real.

“She has you wrapped around her finger, doesn’t she?”

“It’s not like you’re any better,” Jason accuses, stabbing his fork in Roy’s direction.

“Oh, I know,” Roy admits easily. “But at least I’ve just got the one kid. You’ve got how many honorary nieces and nephews now?”

Jason’s mouth is suddenly dry. He takes a sip of water, then starts clearing the dishes.

Roy just follows him silently, opening up the dishwasher and starting to load it. Jason tries to help, but he shoos him away.

“You cooked, so I clean, Jaybird. How many times do we have to do this dance, huh?”

Jason doesn’t mind. He’d really like something to do with his hands right now. Instead, he sits down on one of the stools and watches Roy from across the counter.

“Seven,” he says eventually. “I’ve got seven.”

Roy hums noncommittally. “Lian plus Eliana’s five makes six. Do I know lucky number seven?”

“No.”

Roy glances over as soon as he’s done with the dishwasher and immediately puts on water for tea.

“Do you want to talk about them?”

“Yeah,” Jason says, a little hoarse. “I could—I could use some advice.”

“Alright,” Roy agrees easily, sliding a mug of Earl Grey over, still steeping.

Jason curls his fingers around it. “Her name’s Ashti.”

“Ashti,” Roy repeats. “Pretty. Is that…?”

“Kurdish, I think.”

“How old?”

Jason has to think about it. “Almost four,” he says after a minute. “But I haven’t seen her since she was a baby.”

Roy’s eyes widen a little at that. “So, this is a pre-us niece?”

Jason nods hesitantly.

“Okay. How did—Gotham kid, or…?”

“No, we, uh.” Jason clears his throat. “You remember I told you that Ra’s had me for a while, after, uh.” He gestures to the scar on his throat.

“Yeah, I remember,” Roy says quietly, eyes focused on Jason, but soft. Unthreatening. “You said he wanted to use you. Turn you into one of his assassins.”

“Yeah.” Jason takes a sip of his tea. It’s bitter. He let it steep too long. “He, uh. Wanted to *break me in*, that’s how he phrased it. Like a—a pair of boots or something, I don’t know.”

“He tortured you,” Roy guesses.

Jason nods. “Not personally, but yeah. There was this cage, underground, and they’d take me there and lock me in with someone. They’d try to kill me, sometimes. Those ones were easy. Sometimes, though, they’d be on their knees. And Ra’s’ guys would still want me to kill them.”

He glances up at Roy, but he hasn’t lost that soft, open look in his eyes yet. His listening face.

“I said no, at first. But they—If I didn’t do it, they’d beat the shit out of me. Not like—not like normal beatings, but like—Serious. Irreparable shit. And then they’d toss me in the Pit before I could die.”

“Jesus,” Roy swears, voice hushed. “Fuck, Jay.”

“I said no,” Jason repeats, a little more intensely. “I did. But they—they didn’t let me sleep or eat or—or—they didn’t even give me water and it was the fucking—the fucking *desert*, Roy. And the *Pit.* Over and over and—I was—I couldn’t—”

“Hey,” Roy says softly. “Hey, shh, shh. It’s okay. I get it, man. You started saying yes, yeah? I would’ve, too. Anybody would’ve. I’m not going to give you shit for that.”

Jason presses the heels of his hands against his eyes until he has himself under control again.

“I started saying yes,” he confirms miserably. “It was still *bad*, but it wasn’t—it wasn’t bad enough that I couldn’t fight, so they didn’t throw me in the Pit, but they kept bringing me to the cage every day, and eventually—eventually, they threw a kid in there with me.”

“Oh, Jaybird,” Roy says, sounding so fucking *sad* it almost breaks Jason’s heart.

“I said no,” he says, head in his hands again. “I said no. She was only

—I don't know. Maybe fourteen. I didn't—I wouldn't *touch* her. But they—they tied me down and had her carve me up, had her—had her bring me right to the edge before putting me back in the Pit, I could—I could feel my heart starting to go, you know? How it starts beating slow and off-rhythm and it's all you can hear, your body just—just *giving up,* and then they—they brought her *back,* the next day and gave her that knife again and I—I—"

Roy makes a pained sound, reaching out to squeeze Jason's arm. "It's okay. It's okay."

"No," Jason says harshly. "It's not okay, it's not—"

"You're right," Roy cuts him off. "You're right. It's not okay. That's—That's a seriously fucked up situation to be in. But it's not your fault, you hear me? That's not—The sick fucks who did that to you, to the girl, too, it's on *them*, okay? Not you."

Jason manages a tiny nod. "That's—that's what Talia said, too."

"Yeah, well, I never thought I'd agree with Talia al Ghul, but I do. Any shit they made you do in there, none of it's your fault."

Jason just focuses on breathing for a minute, then takes a sip of his over-steeped tea. The bitterness actually helps, a bit.

"After that, I just—gave up, I guess. I figured I'd kill anybody they told me to without even—" He shakes his head. "But then one day, they took the blindfold off, and it was a *baby*. An actually, literal infant, wailing in the sand, and her mom was screaming and crying, trying to reach through the bars, and I couldn't—Roy, I couldn't. I *wouldn't*. It didn't matter what they did to me, it didn't matter what they threatened, I just—There was no way. A *baby*. A—a fucking helpless, tiny little baby."

Roy's hand on his arm squeezes a little, comforting.

"So, I didn't," he says quietly. "Even after they put me in the Pit so many times I couldn't see anything but green, it was a *baby*. No threat, no reason for the Pit to lash out. I couldn't do it. There were—there were days I wished I could, Roy, fuck, I—I—I'd be in my cell, all raw-edged and wild from the Pit, and just—they always tied me down so it *hurt,* you know? Couldn't move, couldn't sleep, had to—had to hold that fucking position or it'd just hurt *worse*—And I'd tell myself to just fucking do it. Just—just make it quick and *do it*, but every time they put the baby in front of me, I just—I just couldn't, Roy."

“I know,” Roy says quietly, voice rough. “I know.”

“So, I’d—I’d curl up around her and try to—try to keep her calm, you know? Try to hold her still enough she could sleep while they—while they used a whip or their boots or—”

He exhales raggedly, covering his eyes again. Roy squeezes his arm.

“They got angry about it. Couldn’t—couldn’t figure out how to make me do it, I guess. They did whatever they could think of. Held my arm in a fire. Yanked out teeth. Took—took hot pokers to my ears. Acid in my eyes. And then the Pit would give them a fresh fucking canvas for the next day. It’s all—A lot of it’s a blur. I was so out of it, by then. Hadn’t had any water or food, hadn’t slept in—too long. Longer than should be possible, but they were throwing me in the Pit every day, so.”

“Jesus, Jay,” Roy says. “How the fuck did you get out of there?”

“Talia came for me. Killed everybody else there, got me and the baby and her mother out. Had to hike across the mountains to a river, twenty-something kilometers, rough terrain. Her mom was struggling, so I carried the baby most of the way. When we finally got on the boat, I just *dropped*. Passed out for like twenty-two hours.”

“I bet.” Roy rubs his thumb over Jason’s arm gently. “Ashti’s the baby, then?”

Jason nods.

“And you haven’t seen her since?”

He shakes his head. “Talia was setting her up somewhere, and I—Zahra, the mother, she said I was family, after what I did, but I—I don’t know.”

“You didn’t believe her?”

Jason shrugs. “I thought she’d change her mind. That they’d be better off if neither of them ever saw me again.”

Jason doesn’t know how to interpret the noise Roy makes. “And then?”

“And then Talia came to visit,” Jason says, uncovering his face, but still not meeting Roy’s gaze, “and said Zahra asks how I’m doing all

the time. Tells Ashti stories about me like I'm—like I'm some kind of hero. Tells her I'm her *uncle*."

"You are a hero, Jason," Roy says gently. "To them, and to half of fucking Gotham."

"Talia says I should go see her."

Roy allows the change of subject. "Are you going to?"

"I don't know," Jason says miserably. "What if I fuck it up?"

"So what if you do?" Roy asks bluntly. "Even if it means you never see her again, you haven't in almost *four years*. Realistically, there's not a lot of risk here. The only question that matters is: do you want to see her?"

Jason closes his eyes.

"Yes," he answers after a minute, voice whisper quiet.

"Then go."

"Just like that?"

"Just like that, Jaybird," Roy confirms, squeezing his arm again. "I can come with, if you want."

Jason considers it for a moment but ends up shaking his head. "I think I need to do this on my own."

"Alright," Roy says. "When?"

"Tuesday. It's her birthday."

"Okay. Call me after, yeah? So I know you're okay?"

Jason agrees and Roy circles around the counter to pull him into a tight hug.

"I know it was a long time ago," he says. "But I'm sorry that shit happened to you. If you ever want to talk about it more, you know I'm always willing to listen."

"Yeah," Jason says, eyes closed. "I know."

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Tuesday rolls around and Jason spends too long standing in the bathroom, messing with his hair and second-guessing his outfit. He starts casual, then ends up in khakis he doesn't even remember buying, fruitlessly trying to smooth down the wrinkles on the nicest shirt he owns.

"Fuck it," he mutters finally, and strips and starts over, throwing on his comfiest jeans and favorite red hoodie.

Zahra's seen him bleeding and broken and covered in months of accumulated grime, she's not going to care if he looks *presentable*.

Besides, he doesn't own a car, and he's not riding his bike all the way to Metropolis in fucking khakis. What the fuck was he thinking?

He throws on a black leather jacket and grabs a civilian-passing helmet, and then he's out the door, birthday present in hand, then safely stowed in the bike's storage compartment. He takes the drive slower than he normally would, but still gets there in the early afternoon.

They live in a little row house in one of the nice areas of the city. There's a park across the street. A little kid's bike dumped carelessly on the step. Colorful chalk on the sidewalk outside.

Jason stands at the door for a long moment, fist raised, then finally knocks. A dog barks from the backyard. Footsteps sound, light and quick. And then the door opens.

Ashti looks up at him with her big dark eyes and Jason just looks back for a moment that seems to stretch out like taffy.

"Hi," he says finally, voice hoarse. He crouches down so he's level with her and holds out the present. "I hear it's someone's birthday."

The little girl smiles at him, shy.

"Here," Jason says, holding the present out further and shaking it a little. "It's for you."

"Thank you," she says quietly, smiling a little wider.

"You're welcome," Jason manages, throat tight. "Happy birthday."

“Do you want to come in?” Ashti asks. “We have cake.”

Jason swallows hard. His eyes map out her face, committing it to memory.

“That’s okay,” he says. He’s lost his fucking nerve. “I should really be —”

“Ashti, honey, where did you—”

Jason freezes, meeting Zahra’s wide-eyed gaze over Ashti’s tiny shoulder for one beat, two…

Then she steps forward, opening her mouth, and the spell breaks.

Jason’s making a b-line for his bike before he can even think about it.

“Wait!” Zahra calls after him. “Wait! Jason!”

Jason pulls his helmet on, heart pounding panic-fast in his ears, swinging a leg over his bike and pulling up the kickstand.

“Jason,” Zahra says, barefoot on the grass. “Jason, please. Don’t go.”

He stares at her for a minute, eyes wide behind his helmet, hand hovering over the ignition.

“Dayê?” Ashti calls from the door, confused. “What’s wrong?”

“Nothing’s wrong, baby,” Zahra calls back, then lowers her voice so only Jason can hear. “Please, Jason. Just a few minutes? It would mean the world to her.”

Jason glances between mother and daughter for a long moment, then puts the kickstand back down slowly and dismounts, pulling his helmet off.

“Thank you,” Zahra says, getting a little teary-eyed.

Jason nods, eyes averted, not trusting himself to speak, and follows her back to the house.

“Ashti, baby,” Zahra says, scooping the little girl up. “This is your Xal Jason.”

Her already huge eyes widen as she stares up at Jason.

“Hi,” he says, hoarse and low.

“Hi,” she says back, just as quiet.

Zahra shoos him inside and over to a couch, taking his helmet and jacket. “Here, sit, sit. Do you want—water? Coffee? I just made a fresh pot.”

“Um,” Jason says awkwardly. “Coffee is—coffee is good.”

“Good. Good. Here,” she says, and drops Ashti on his lap.

“Hi,” he says again.

She giggles a little. “You’re funny.”

Jason cracks a smile. “Yeah?”

“Yeah.” A tiny hand reaches up to pat Jason’s cheek. “Funny.”

“I guess so.”

“Are you really Xal Jason?”

Jason swallows. “Yeah, squirt. I guess I am.”

“Your eyes don’t glow, though,” she says. “Dayê says your eyes glow green.”

“Oh,” Jason breathes. He hadn’t realized— “Yeah. Yeah, they, uh. Used to do that.”

“But not anymore?”

“No,” Jason says. “Not for a long time, now.”

Ashti pouts a little. Jason gets the feeling she thought the glowing eyes were cool. What kind of stories has Zahra been telling her?

“You have the white hair, though,” she says, tugging at it the white streak a little, even though Jason can tell she’s trying to be gentle as she runs her pudgy little fingers through it.

“Yeah,” Jason agrees. “That’s here to stay.”

“Cool.”

Jason huffs a little laugh. Take that, Danny.

“Did you have a good birthday?” he asks.

“So far.”

“Yeah? What did you do?”

Bored with his hair, she’s moved on to playing with his hoodie strings, curled up against his chest. Jason can feel her heart, beating right alongside his for the first time in more than three years, and he has to close his eyes for a second, overwhelmed.

“We took Leo for a walk,” she says, hair tickling Jason’s neck. “And then went out for breakfast. And then to the park.”

“The one across the street?”

“Yep,” Ashti says. She snuggles in a little closer, tugging Jason’s arm until it’s wrapped around her.

Jason takes a deep breath, curling his other arm around her, too.

“Looks like a nice park,” he says, voice thick.

Ashti yawns. “Yeah. It’s nice. Leo likes it, too.”

“Are there lots of kids to play with?”

“Uh-huh,” she says, starting to sound sleepy.

Jason closes his eyes, sinking into the dual rhythm of their heartbeats as she mumbles about slides and swings and all her playground friends until, eventually, she falls fast asleep.

When Jason opens his eyes a few minutes later, Zahra is sitting across from him, two cups of coffee, probably not even warm anymore, sitting on the table. Jason brushes the tears off his cheeks.

“Naptime?” he asks, voice hushed.

Zahra nods. “I can take her upstairs, if you want?”

“Can I—can I just—”

“You want to hold her?”

“Yeah,” Jason says quietly. “Just—just for a minute?”

“Jason,” Zahra says gently. “You can hold her for as long as you like.”

So, he listens to her heartbeat for a long while, ten or twenty minutes, then lifts her as easily as he did when she was two months old and follows Zahra up the stairs to a room decorated in a hundred shades of green and tucks her into bed.

They walk back downstairs in silence.

“Coffee?” Zahra offers, smiling.

Jason huffs a quiet laugh. “Yeah, sure.”

He follows her into the kitchen with their cups, watches as she starts a new pot, rinses out the mugs.

Then Zahra turns to him.

“Can I give you a hug?”

Jason opens his arms. He has to stoop a bit to wrap his own arms around her, but he doesn’t mind. Her headscarf smells like baking cookies. Cinnamon and sugar and warmth.

“I’m so glad to see you,” she says, pulling back.

“I’m sorry I didn’t come sooner,” Jason says, and it’s true. “She’s—she’s so big.”

Zahra laughs a little. “Yes. She’s growing up fast.”

She pours them both a cup of coffee, offering cream and sugar. Jason takes cream, no sugar. Zahra takes sugar, no cream.

“She still knows your heartbeat, though,” Zahra says. “I’ve never seen her go down for a nap that easily.”

Jason blinks a little, trying desperately not to start crying again.

“How have you been, Jason?”

“Oh, you know,” he says, wrapping his hands around the mug, feeling the warmth of it.

“I’m afraid I don’t,” Zahra says, gently scolding. “It’s been a long time. What have you been up to?”

Jason shifts in his seat a little. “Well, I went back to Gotham, after I—after.”

“That’s where you grew up, yes?”

“Yeah, home sweet home,” he says, only a little sarcastic. Gotham’s a shithole, but it’s *his* shithole.

“Talia mentioned,” Zahra starts, a little cautious, “that you’ve had a difficult few years.”

Jason nods a little stiffly. “Yeah, I, uh. Had some…family trouble, I guess. A fight with my—with my dad. A bad one.”

“Family is difficult, sometimes,” she says. “But you can always make things right, with time.”

“Not sure time is going to be enough for this one,” Jason says honestly.

“He is your father,” she says. “He’ll come around.”

Jason smiles, a little bitter, but mostly just sad. “He already has. He’s trying really hard to—to make things right, I think. It’s me that—that can’t—” He huffs, unable to find the words. “Move past it, I guess.”

He takes a sip of coffee, quiet for a minute, before explaining further. “He, uh. Put me in the hospital.”

“Oh,” Zahra says, voice small. “Are you alright?”

“Yeah. It’s been…a year and a half, now? But I’ve got pins holding one of my ribs together and a plate in my skull, so. Can’t really forget.”

“Oh, Jason,” she says, eyes a little watery. “I’m so sorry.”

He just shrugs, trying to brush it off. “It’s alright. I can take a little pain.”

It’s the understatement of the century, and they both know it. Zahra has the grace not to point it out.

“What about you and Ashti?” he says, eager to change the subject.

“We’ve been well. The first year, we went to many doctor’s appointments, working to get Ashti’s growth back on track. She’s doing well, now. She goes to preschool three mornings a week. They

had a party for her yesterday in class."

"That's great," Jason says honestly. "Zahra, that's—I'm so glad she's doing well."

She nods. "I am glad, also. She had nightmares when she was very young. But they cleared up eventually." She hesitates. "I'm not sure if Talia told you…"

"The stories?" Jason says. "Yeah. And Ashti, she—she mentioned them."

"Yes. They helped, so I told them more and more, and I'm afraid you've become quite the legendary figure in this house," she says, smiling a little.

Jason scoffs lightly, taking another sip of coffee. "Ashti said—Did my eyes really glow?"

"Yes," Zahra says. "Did you not know?"

Jason shakes his head. "I mean, I knew they did sometimes. When I was angry, or…But they glowed all the time?"

"All the time," Zahra confirms. "I—well, it's a bit silly, I suppose, in hindsight, but I thought you were a demon, that first day. That they'd managed to bind the devil himself, somehow, and they were…feeding you."

Jason chokes on his coffee. "You thought I was going to *eat* Ashti?"

"I didn't know what to think. You seemed…otherworldly. And that horrible thing they kept in your mouth, and the glowing eyes, and your hair…"

"I guess a demon probably seemed reasonable," Jason admits, smiling a little.

"But then you tucked her against your chest," Zahra continues. "Shielded my daughter with your body, and I knew you were no demon."

Jason doesn't know what to say to that.

There's a long pause, both of them sipping at their coffee, then Zahra says: "Will you stay? Until Ashti wakes up?"

“Yeah,” Jason says, voice quiet and a little hoarse. He takes a sip of his coffee, hiding behind the cup. “Yeah, I’ll stay as long as you want.”

Zahra smiles, wide and bright, and Jason feels some unnamed tension unspool inside of his chest. He smiles back.

When he finally does leave, after Ashti’s woken up and opened her present and they’ve all had enough cake to last them until next year, he leaves with another visit scheduled in his calendar and Zahra’s number saved in his phone.

# Chapter 4

Chapter Summary

Jason’s asleep when he gets the call.

“Hood,” Oracle says over the line. “Black Bat needs backup. I just sent the fastest route to your hood.”

“Sitrep?” Jason asks, already on his feet and gearing up before she finishes, quickly blinking the last of his bleariness away. There isn’t a whole lot Cain can’t handle by herself. If she needs back up, it's gotta be serious.

“Intercepted a human trafficking ring just inside your territory. Took the
perps out, but they had two victims with them, and she needs a hand.”

Huh. Not what he expected. He heads to the roof anyway.

“They hurt?”

“Unknown.”

“Unknown?” Jason asks, a little incredulous, as he takes the running leap required to make it across the alley.

“They found a tight spot to hole up in and won’t come out,” Oracle explains. “We’re pretty sure they’re from your part of town, so we’re hoping you can help.”

“What, Black Bat can’t just drag them—”

“They’re kids, Hood.”

Oh.

Chapter Notes

Did not mean to let this sit for over a year lmao sorry

See the end of the chapter for more notes

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“They’re kids, Hood.”

Oh.

He’s only a couple blocks away, so he puts on a burst of speed and gets there in record time, dropping into the alley with a tight tuck and roll.

“Hey,” he says to Cass, a little warily. He’s never quite sure where he stands with her.

Cass just stares at him, then points at the gap between the dumpster at the end of the alley and the wall.

Alright, then. Straight to business.

Jason approaches slowly, then crouches down far enough away to not block the exit and pulls off his helmet.

“Hey, there.”

The two kids that peer wide-eyed back at him are dirty and look a little shocky, but they look well-fed. Probably have a home to go back to and haven't been gone for long.

Jason doesn't recognize either of them, but that doesn't mean much. There are so many kids in the Alley, and maybe he *should* know them all, but he doesn't.

"You're the Red Hood," the older one says quietly.

"That's me," Jason says, smiling a little. "What's your name, kiddo?"

"I'm Olivia." Her voice is quiet, but not quite timid.

"Nice to meet you, Olivia. Is that your little brother you've got there?"

She nods cautiously. "Jamie."

"Nice to meet you, too, Jamie."

With the way his sister's wrapped around him, the little boy's almost completely invisible, but he pokes his head out a little further to watch Jason.

"That's a good hiding spot you guys found," Jason says encouragingly. "But it's pretty cold out, so why don't we see if we can get you somewhere warm and dry for the night, okay?"

Olivia shakes her head. "Bad guys," she whispers.

"Yeah," Jason says softly. "Yeah, there were bad guys. But Black Bat got 'em all, okay? It's safe to come out now."

Olivia does not look convinced.

"Did you get the scary lady, Mr. Hood?" Jamie says, voice so tiny, he must only be four or five.

The scary lady? Who—

Oh. Cass.

"Nah, little man," Jason says. "She's the one who called me, yeah? She's pretty scary, I'll give you that. But she's good scary."

"Good scary?"

“Yeah, you know,” Jason says. “I bet your big sister can be pretty scary when someone’s trying to hurt you, right?”

The little boy nods. “Good scary.”

“That’s right.”

“The scary lady is a big sister?”

“Yep.”

The kid cocks his head. “Whose?”

“Uh.” Jason’s eyes dart to Cass for a single instant, nervous. “Mine, actually.”

After that, it’s pretty easy to convince the kids to come out from behind the dumpster. When prompted, Olivia rattles off her home address and confirms that they’re safe there and want to go back. Twenty minutes later, Jason and Cass are crouching on the rooftop across the street, watching through the windows as their mother smothers them with teary kisses.

Cass bumps their shoulders together. “Little brother.”

Jason groans, but he’s grinning under the hood, and he knows Cass can tell. “That’s not going away, is it?”

Cass just shakes her head. Under that horror show of a mask, Jason’s pretty sure she’s grinning.

They sit in comfortable silence for a minute, watching as the lights flick off one by one in the apartment, the kids and their mom getting ready for bed and then going to sleep.

“You are different,” Cass says out of nowhere, “than I thought.”

Thrown a bit, Jason takes a beat to respond. “Yeah?”

Cass nods minutely.

“Different how?”

A shrug. “Different.” Then she adds: “Like B.”

Jason flinches, then snarls a little in a poor attempt at covering it up. “*What?*”

Despite how tense their little perch has suddenly become, Cass seems unbothered. “You care about them.”

“About the kids? Of course, I care about—”

“No,” she says, and jerks her head at the city spread out around them. “About *them*.”

Oh.

Well, yeah.

“It’s Gotham,” he says, not understanding why this is worthy of conversation. “We all care about Gotham, or we wouldn’t be doing this.”

Cass silently shakes her head. “We help people. Any people. You help *these people.* Like B.”

“I mean, yeah,” Jason says lamely.

He’s still uncomfortable with the comparison, but he sort of sees where she’s coming from, now. He and Bruce, they…they’re both kind of ruined for other places, aren’t they? He can’t imagine going and setting down roots in Bludhaven or Hong Kong or San Francisco like the others have.

Gotham’s it for him. He was born in this city, and he’d always figured he’d die here.

Hell, the crazier half of him sometimes thinks that’s why he came back in the first place. That, if the Joker had killed him in Gotham, instead, he would never have woken up.

Who the hell knows.

The one thing Jason’s sure on, though, is that if there’s any kindness left in the universe, he’ll be inside Gotham’s city limits when he kicks it for good.

He wonders if Bruce feels the same way.

“Nightwing told me not to talk about Batman,” Cass says, like it’s an apology even though it’s definitely not.

Jason scoffs. “Tell Nightwing to stop mothering me.”

Not that it would do anything. Dick's always been a meddler.

On the horizon, the smog that hangs perpetually over the city is starting to glow a vaguely toxic yellow, threatening the appearance of the sun.

"Have you been out all night?" Jason asks suddenly, a little concerned.

Cass stares at him.

Uncomfortable, Jason says: "My place is just a couple blocks over. I mean. If you need somewhere to crash. It's a long way back to the cave from all the way out here."

The stare continues for long enough Jason's starting to want to crawl into a hole and die, and then, finally, Cass nods.

"Cool," Jason says awkwardly. "Okay. Uh. Follow me?"

And like a silent and terrifying shadow, Cass follows him home.

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Cass is gone before he wakes up, which isn't really surprising. What is surprising is that she shows up the next time he's out patrolling.

And the next.

And the next.

Finally, he says: "B Bat, you're a badass, and I like you, I really do, but you're creepy as hell."

He's sitting at the edge of a building, feet hanging over the drop, and she's sitting cross-legged a few feet over, facing him and *staring*. When he speaks, she cocks her head a few degrees, her gaze somehow piercing even through the full-face mask.

"C'mon," Jason says, gesturing at her. "You gotta realize the staring is unnerving."

She hums a little, maybe confused, maybe accepting. Jason has no

fucking clue. He doesn't know her well enough to get a good read.

"You are," she says slowly, "scared of me?"

Huffing an easy laugh, Jason nods. "Uh, duh. You could beat the shit outta me."

"Won't."

Jason shrugs. "Probably not."

"*Won't.*"

Smiling wryly, Jason says: "Unless I fuck up, right? Start killing again?"

"Won't," Cass says again, pointing at him.

"Probably not. The Alley's better now. It's not necessary."

Silence.

"Never necessary," she says finally. "Never."

"And that's where you and me disagree, double B," Jason says, flopping onto his back to look up at the red-gray haze of Gotham's night sky.

"Never," she repeats.

"It's never *nice*," Jason agrees. "It's never not *sad*. You, me, and B? We're all on the same page about that. It's not like I like killing people. It's not like I don't believe people can be redeemed or whatever. But if killing some asshole that doesn't want to change, who consistently refuses to change, prevents other people from dying? *Innocents* from dying? I'm not gonna let my fucking feelings stop me. My conscience has been through a lot, it can take it."

He doesn't think Cass likes that answer much, but maybe that's just him assuming.

Pretty safe assumption, though.

"You'd kill again?"

"If I needed to."

She doesn't like that answer, either.

"Needed to?"

Jason lets out a long sigh, then props himself up on one elbow so he can look at her more directly.

"If some motherfucker is threatening the life of some civilian or, hell, even one of you knuckleheads, and the only way to reliably stop them is a bullet? That's not even *illegal*, so yeah. If I get a shot at Sionis? Yeah. If I get a shot at *Joker?* Hell, yeah. I know you don't like it. I know Bruce will never forgive me for it. I don't care. Some people can't be saved."

She sits on that for a minute. Thoughtful, maybe.

"Why Black Mask and Joker?" she asks finally, and if it were anyone else, he'd be pissed, but from Cass? It's an honest question, he's pretty sure. Why he thinks it's okay, not why he wants them dead.

"Sionis has too much money," Jason says. "Every time we try to put him away for good, he eels out of it, and he probably always will. And Joker? He doesn't do what he does for money or fame or love, he does it because he *likes* it. He likes hurting people. He likes killing people. And he's shown over, and over, and over again that Arkham can't hold him, and it can't help him. B's tried for, what, fifteen years? The only way he stops hurting people, stops *killing* people, is if he's dead, so that's what he needs to be."

"Killer Croc?"

"Not that bad of a guy, actually."

"Riddler?"

"Can probably be rehabilitated."

"Mad Hatter?"

"Guy's a creep, but he's not that clever. Without Joker around to destabilize everything, Arkham can handle him. Same with Crane and Dent. Harley's crazy, but that's only half her fault, and she's pretty chill when she's not with Joker. And Ivy's only labeled a villain because we live in a shortsighted capitalistic society that cares more about short-term profits than the long-term survivability of the planet."

Cass stares at him.

“What? Have you ever actually listened to her monologues? She’s got a point.”

Cass hums, but lets it go. “Penguin?”

Jason scoffs. “Didn’t kill him when I had the chance, did I? Nah, Cobblepot’s just a mob boss with a flair for the dramatic.”

“You have,” Cass says slowly, “thought about this. A lot.”

A little embarrassed, Jason shrugs. “I mean, yeah. We all play Batman in our heads sometimes, right?”

“Play…Batman?”

“Yeah, you know. ‘What would I do if Gotham were mine,’ yadda, yadda, yadda. Doesn’t everyone do that?”

She shrugs. “I don’t.”

“Huh.” Jason lays back down, looks up at the sky. “Really? Guess you better start.”

“Why.”

Jason looks over at her. “What?”

No response.

“Because you’re gonna be Batman?” Jason ventures. “Right? I mean, I just figured.”

There’s a long moment of silence, and then Cass says: “Maybe.”

*Maybe.*

The fuck is that supposed to mean. There isn’t really another option, is there?

There’s Tim, but Tim’s *young*, and he leads a whole ass team, there’s no way he could do both. Bruce *promised him* it wouldn’t be Dick, so it better not be fucking Dick. Steph doesn’t want it, and she’s a brawler at heart, not a tactician or martial artist. He has no doubt she *could*do it, but it’s not the best fit. Damian’s a literal child, so. Obviously not Damian.

“B has…brought it up,” Cass clarifies.

Read: he offered, and she’s just still deciding.

Thank fuck. He was starting to get worried.

“You’ll be great,” Jason says honestly. “Better than B ever was.”

Cass shakes her head, but it’s less flat-out denial and more *I don’t know how to feel about that* , so Jason lets it go.

“Hey, you hungry?” he asks instead. “This guy who used to work for me just opened a food truck and it’s parked a couple streets over tonight. We could check it out?”

Nodding, Cass stands. “Good to support your children.”

Jason grins. “They grow up so fast.”

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“So,” Tim says at their next orphanage-reopening meeting. “I hear you’re hanging out with Cass, now?”

Mouth full of corned beef hash, Jason doesn’t respond because his mama and Alfred raised him right, but he does throw a bit of toast at the kid.

“Hey!”

“Serves you right, stalker,” Jason says once he’s swallowed.

Tim levels a flat look at him. “It’s not stalking to talk to your sister about your brother, Jason.”

Jason chokes a little.

“Sorry, was that…too much?”

“Nah,” Jason says brushing it off. “Just. Kinda weird. But it’s fine.”

“I get it. I never had siblings before, either. Takes a bit to get used to.”

Jason’s crisis is a little bit more about how many times he’s nearly

killed Tim and how there's a corner of his brain that still screams a warning klaxon of PREDATOR PREDATOR PREDATOR RED ALERT whenever Cass is within twenty yards of him.

"Yeah," he says instead of vocalizing any of that.

"So," Tim says. "You and Cass?"

"Yeah, she's like stalking me now or something."

Tim rolls his eyes like the shitty teenager he is. "She's not *stalking* you, Jason, Jesus."

"What else am I supposed to call it?" Jason says, waving the diner's slightly crooked fork around, scrambled eggs valiantly holding on for the ride. "She keeps showing up whenever I go out."

"She's curious," Tim says. "She doesn't understand you."

"What's not to understand? I'm a simple man."

Tim lets out a long-suffering sigh.

"What?" Jason says, but then he's distracted by Jada coming over. "Oh, hey, Jada. Didn't know you were on today. How's the squirt?"

"Morning, Jay," she says, refilling his coffee cup without bothering to ask. He maybe eats here too often. "Darius is doing good. My mom's watching him today."

"Tooth come in yet?"

"Finally, yeah."

Seeing Tim's confusion, Jason explains: "Poor kid was teething all last week."

"Oh," Tim says, expression serious. Deliberately casual, his eyes drop down to his phone under the table.

Jason laughs out loud. "His baby teeth are coming in, nerd. Hurts like hell, near constant crying."

"I know what teething is," Tim says, annoyed and definitely not pretending he wasn't just googling the definition. To Jada, he says: "I'm glad he's feeling better."

“Me, too,” she says dryly. “I feel like I haven’t slept in a week.”

Both Jason and Tim make sympathetic sounds.

“Let me know if you need anything, yeah?” Jason says. “You’ve got my number.”

“You’re a sweetheart, Jay,” Jada says, patting his shoulder with her free hand. To Tim, she says: “More coffee?”

“Yeah, thanks,” Tim says, holding up his cup.

“Oh,” Jason says belatedly. “Sorry, Jada, this is Tim. Tim, this is Jada.”

“Nice to meet you, Tim. Any friend of Jay’s is a friend of mine.”

“Nice to meet you, too. And, uh,” he glances at Jason quickly, “he’s my brother, actually.”

“Oh!” Jada squints at them a little, clearly searching for the resemblance.

“Adopted,” Jason says wryly. “C’mon, Jada, you think I’m blood related to this pasty-ass motherfucker?”

Tim rolls his eyes again but kicks him under the table good-naturedly. “Adopted,” he agrees.

Jada smacks Jason’s arm lightly. “Don’t bully your little brother, Jay.”

Surprised, Tim laughs.

And keeps laughing.

For like.

Too long.

“Sorry,” he says finally, “inside joke.”

You little shit.

“Alright,” Jada says, amused. “You two enjoy your breakfast.”

“Will do,” Tim agrees.

As soon as she’s out of earshot, Jason kicks Tim under the table.

“Ow! What the shit!”

“That’s not fucking funny,” Jason whispers. “What the fuck!”

Tim grins. “I mean. It’s kinda funny.”

“Nope. Not funny.”

“I think *I* get to decide if it’s funny or not,” Tim says. “Since it was my bones that got snapped like popsicle sticks.”

Jason scowls at him.

“Now you know how Dick feels when you make death jokes.”

“Not the same,” he insists, trying really hard not to think about the sound Tim made when Jason broke his arm.

“Jason,” Tim says, suddenly serious. “You good?”

Jason frowns at him. “Yeah.”

“Your—” Tim grabs a napkin and holds it out for him. “Your lip.”

Oh.

Oh, shit.

“Fuck,” he says aloud, wiping at the blood running down his chin. “Jesus. Sorry.”

“Don’t—you don’t have to apologize. *I’m* sorry. I didn’t mean to—You know I don’t care about that anymore, right? I forgave you a long time ago.”

Jason stares at him, dumbfounded.

“You know that, right? Jason?”

Tim waves a hand in front of Jason’s face, snapping him out of it. Jason clears his throat and leans back against the vinyl of the diner booth. Napkin pressed against the bleeding wound made by his own fucking teeth, Jason shakes his head.

“Why—Why the fuck—” He shakes his head again, not understanding.

“Jay, I saw the effect the Pit had on Bruce, remember?”

When he almost got strangled to death on the Manor's kitchen floor? Yeah, he remembers. Can't really forget that one.

"I never," Jason says, then clears his throat and starts over. "I never even apologized."

Tim shrugs. "You kinda did, though?"

Um, no? He fucking didn't.

"It's kinda obvious. With, like, the way you are now. That you regret it. Right? You regret it?"

"Yeah," Jason manages, throat tight.

"See?"

Jason shakes his head. "That's not—That's not good enough."

"Sure, it is."

Jason shakes his head again, but Tim ignores him.

"Anyway, doesn't really matter what you think, does it? It's already done. You're forgiven. Nothing you can do about it."

Jesus.

He doesn't—he doesn't deserve to be forgiven. Not for that. Not for—

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Jason starts back into the world of the living to the smell of fucking… peppermint?

"Okay, he's back, I think." Tim in crouched in front of Jason, phone in one hand and the essential oil bottle that had been held up to Jason's nose a second ago in the other. "Wait, seriously? Fuck. How do I—Okay. Yeah. Okay. Thanks, Roy. Here he is."

Jason takes the phone from Tim and, with a little prompting, brings it up to his ear.

“Hey, Jaybird,” Roy says on the other end of the line.

Jason swallows.

“You there, buddy?”

“Yeah,” Jason manages. “Yeah. I’m…”

“Okay,” Roy says easily. “You’re doing good, Jay. Timmy’s gonna take real good care of you until I can get there, okay?”

Jason doesn’t understand. “Where,” he says. “Where are…What happened.”

“You checked out for a bit, bud.”

Oh.

Shit.

He hasn’t done that in…a long time.

Fuck.

*Fuck.*

“Roy,” he manages, suddenly low on air.

“I’m here, Jay. Do you see Tim? Get eyes on Tim for me.”

Tim’s still crouched in front of Jason, looking awkward, but attentive.

“You see him?”

“Yeah.”

“Give him the phone, okay? He’s gonna put me on speaker.”

Okay. Okay.

Jason passes the phone to Tim. Tim puts Roy on speaker.

“Do you feel okay about putting a hand on Tim’s chest, Jay? Feel his breathing?”

Yeah. Yeah, that’s probably a good idea.

As soon as he holds his hand out, Tim takes it and holds it against his

chest.

“You know what to do,” Roy says, and he’s right, Jason does know what to do.

It takes him a couple minutes, but he syncs his breathing up with Tim’s eventually, and after a couple more minutes like that, slumps back into the couch cushions.

“All good, Roy,” he says tiredly. “You don’t need to drive all the way out here.”

“Am I still on speaker?”

Jason picks up the phone. “Not anymore.”

“Okay. You sure?”

“Yeah,” Jason insists. “Seriously, I’m good. It wasn’t so bad.”

“It’s been a while since—”

“Yeah, and it was fine. I’m fine. I’m not kidding, Roy. You drive all the way out here over nothing and I’ll kick your ass.”

There’s a long pause, and then Roy says: “Fine, but call me if you need to, okay?”

Jason rolls his eyes. “Yes, mom.”

“Fuck off.”

“You first.”

“Yeah, yeah,” Roy laughs. “Okay. I’ll see you next weekend, then? And call me before you go to bed tonight.”

“Yeah, okay. Talk to you later.”

“Talk to you later, Jaybird. Bye.”

“Bye.”

Jason hangs up.

“Sorry,” he says to Tim, then, “Jesus, get off the floor.”

Hesitantly, Tim sits down on the other end of the couch.

“Sorry,” Jason repeats. “Didn’t mean for that to happen.”

“It’s cool. Sorry for pushing the topic.”

Yeah.

“Roy said that doesn’t happen very, uh, often?”

“What, dissociating? No. Not anymore.”

“But it… used to?”

Jason shrugs. “Hard to say.”

At Tim’s questioning noise, he elaborates: “I used to black out sometimes? From the Pit. So, I don’t know how much of the time I’m missing is from that or, like, regular dissociating.”

“And you always have a panic attack afterwards?”

“Yep, pretty much.”

“Oh. Well, that sucks.”

Jason laughs, surprised. “Yeah, I guess it kinda does, doesn’t it?”

“Your brain’s like, kicking you while you’re down.”

“Inconsiderate of it.”

And then, somehow, they’re both laughing.

“Aw, fuck,” Jason says after the laughter dies down. “I didn’t finish my breakfast.”

Tim blinks at him. “Oh, no, you did.”

“Wait, for real?”

“Yeah,” Tim says, nodding. “You stopped responding, so I thought you were just done talking about it, but then you finished your food and looked up and you were just…”

“Blanked out?”

“Yeah,” Tim agrees. “Like you were in shock.”

“Sorry.”

“Again, you don’t need to apologize. It’s not like you meant to, and I was the one who triggered you in the first place.”

“You didn’t mean to,” Jason argues.

“Still did it, though.”

Well. Yeah.

“Wait, how did we get back here?” Jason asks, suddenly thinking about the blocks between his place and the diner.

Tim shrugs. “If I held your hand, you followed pretty easily.”

Wow.

“Wow,” he says aloud. “That is…kinda disturbing, not gonna lie.”

Tim shrugs again, smiling a little this time. “I figure it just means you trust me.”

Jason throws one of the couch pillows at him. “Fuck off.”

“Your subconscious doesn’t lie, Jason,” Tim says primly.

Jason throws another pillow at him, and then Tim throws one back, and soon enough, they’re wrestling on the floor like children.

Twenty minutes, three wet willies, and a couple of lightly bruised ribs later, they’re both lying on the floor, panting.

“I think,” Tim says after he’s caught his breath, “if you still weren’t convinced, that pretty much just proved the brothers thing, yeah?”

Surprised, Jason laughs, short and a little breathless still.

“Yeah,” he says. “I s’pose it does.”

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Roy, the fucking traitor, tells Dick to keep an eye on him for a few days, which results in Jason not getting a fucking moment’s peace.

“He’s *smothering me*,” Jason says to Eliana, voice a little muffled by the

carpeted living room floor he's lying face down on.

"He just wants to make sure you're safe, mijo."

Jason just groans into the carpet.

"He's your big brother, it's his job."

Huffing, Jason rolls over enough that he can stare at her balefully. "This is literally the first time in our entire lives that he's given a single shit."

"He's making up for lost time, then."

"Ugh. Why are you taking his side?"

Eliana laughs, probably at how whiny his voice sounded just then. "Drink your chocolate, Jason."

Grumbling a little, he sits up and moves over to sit on the floor next to the coffee table. Eliana's hot chocolate is nothing like Alfred's, thick and spicy where the old butler's is creamy and sweet, but Jason likes it just as much.

Not that he'd ever tell Alfred that.

"I'm sorry he roped you into this," Jason says after a few sips. "I can literally just go back to my place and he'll never—"

Across the table from him, sitting on her warn blue couch, Eliana cuts him off. "Oh, no, Jason Peters, you are staying right here until one of those siblings of yours comes to collect you."

Jason stares at her, incredulous.

"You think I'm going to be the one to let you out of my sight? *Neglect you?* "

Sputtering, Jason says: "*Neglect??*"

She ignores him, gesturing vaguely with her mug. "In your hour of need? Never."

"I am literally, one hundred percent *fine*," Jason groans. "It wasn't a big deal."

El just hums, her utter lack of belief clear.

“Seriously,” Jason insists. “Minor dissociative episode. Just a baby one. Barely lasted an *hour*. That’s, like, a record for me.”

There’s a beat of kinda awkward silence before Jason has to ask.

“What? What’s wrong?”

“Nothing, nothing, just—” She leans forward a little, eyes wide and kinda sad-looking. “You had a dissociative episode?”

“Well, yeah,” Jason says awkwardly. “Didn’t Dick tell you?”

She shakes her head.

“Oh,” Jason says. “Well, I guess that was pretty cool of him. I thought…”

Shit, maybe *Dick* didn’t know? Now that he’s thinking about it, it was never actually *said*, just ‘heard you had a tough day, little wing, want some company?’ and ‘yeah, Nightwing wanted me to patrol with you tonight’ and ‘Eliana says you can stay at her place tomorrow night, Jase.’

He’d figured Tim would’ve told him, especially after Roy called, but…

Maybe he didn’t.

“Shit,” he says quietly, trying not to have a whole ass crisis over it.

“Are those—is that something you struggle with? Often?”

Jesus. He’s literally never spoken of this before and now he’s having to explain it twice in one week?

“No, I—” Jason says, then hesitates. “I used to, like…”

Fuck, when did those start?

“Like two years ago? I think? That’s when I started noticing them. But I haven’t had one in…four or five months?” A little uncomfortable, he takes a sip from his mug to have something to do with his hands. “They’re not—I know some people just, like, have them? But mine are, uh, a trauma thing, you know? And I’m doing better now, so I don’t really get them.”

“I’m glad you’re doing better, Jay,” El says. “Can I give you a hug?”

“Uh,” Jason says, trying to figure out how much worse that would make him feel right now.

“Maybe later,” El says. “But only if you want.”

Jason nods stiffly, taking another sip of hot chocolate.

“If you want to talk about it, I’m happy to talk about it,” she says carefully. “Or we could just put on a movie. Either way.”

Strangely, Jason finds himself actually deliberating. He likes talking to Eliana. And it might be nice to talk about it with someone who wasn’t there, who would see Jason as a civilian instead of a mostly reformed murderer.

What would he even say? He can’t—For the life of him, he can’t imagine how to put the words together to even start to explain.

“Movie, I think,” he decides finally. “But thanks. Really.”

“Of course, mijo,” she says, smiling a little. “Anytime.”

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When he opens the door the next morning, Damian Wayne is waiting on the other side.

“Oh, you’ve got to be kidding me,” Jason complains. “The *kid?*That’s just insulting.”

“Tt,” Damian says, crossing his arms over his chest. “I am hardly a child, Todd.”

“Who’s Todd?” Lina asks, peering out at Damian from behind Jason’s knee.

“No one,” Jason says, rolling his eyes. “Damian’s just being silly.”

“Oh,” she says, then sticks her hand out. “Hi Damian, I’m Lina. Dickie says you have a cow.”

Damian shakes her tiny hand very seriously. “Yes, I care for a cow. Her name is Batcow, and she is a fine example of her species.”

Lina giggles a little. “You talk funny.”

“Lina!” El scolds from somewhere behind Jason, and then she’s nudging him out of the doorway. “Don’t be rude, mija. And Jason! Aren’t you going to invite your brother in?”

“Do I have to?”

Smacking him on the arm, she turns back to Damian. “I’m sorry for these two, young man. Would you like to come in? Breakfast’s almost ready.”

“Thank you, ma’am,” Damian says. “I do not wish to impose—”

“No, no, you’re not imposing! You’re one of Jason’s, so you’re one of ours. Come on in.”

A little stiffly, Damian steps into the apartment. “Thank you.”

“I’m sorry, honey, which one are you again? I don’t think we’ve met,” Eliana says as she closes the door.

“Damian,” the kid says. “You likely have not heard of me.”

“Oh, no, I’m sure Jason has mentioned you. I just have a hard time keeping track.”

Turning to Jason, Damian says: “What could you possibly have said about me? We haven’t spoken in nearly a year, and that was after I gave you a concussion.”

El shifts awkwardly, gaze flicking between the two of them.

“Way to make it weird, kid,” Jason sighs. “And anyway, I already had that concussion, you don’t get to take credit for it.”

Damian crosses his arms. “You needed stitches,” he says flatly.

Jason scoffs, brushing it off. “Only a couple.”

“Five.”

“Jeez, kid, lighten up. It’s water under the bridge.”

Getting all huffy, Damian says: “You should not downplay your injuries, brother. It was a serious offense and I have not yet apologized.”

“Sorry,” Jason says to Eliana. “I’m just gonna—”

She nods when he jerks a thumb at the door. “Take your time.”

“Jesus, kid,” Jason says once they’re out in the hall. “What the fuck was that?”

“I am being direct,” Damian says tightly. “Richard advises that it is the best method when speaking with you.”

What, is Dick their resident Jason whisperer now?

“I would like to offer my apologies now for the incidents that occurred when last you visited the Manor.”

“Kid, you don’t need to apologize,” Jason insists. “I literally *shot you.* You deserved a free hit.”

Damian scowls. “There is something deeply wrong with you, Todd.”

“Dude,” Jason says, actually a little offended. “Uncalled for.”

“It is the truth. You do not value your wellbeing as you should. I acted without honor and attacked you when you could not fight back. It was wrong, and I am sorry.”

Jason stares at him for a minute.

“Okay,” he says finally. “Fine, whatever. Apology accepted. You’re forgiven. Can we go eat breakfast now?”

“That is acceptable.”

When they reenter the apartment, Eliana sticks her head out of the kitchen to give him an assessing look.

“All good,” he tells her, clapping Damian on the shoulder. “Right, Dames?”

“Unhand me,” Damian snarls, shaking him off.

Jason ruffles his hair.

Violence is averted by Milo and Danny running over from God knows where to cling to Jason’s pantlegs.

“Up,” Danny demands, arms up.

“Yeah, yeah,” Jason says, and hefts the kid up onto a hip.

Meanwhile, Milo is staring at Damian for long enough for it to be awkward. Damian just stares back.

Finally, Milo turns to Jason. “Damian or Tim?”

Damian scoffs. “I am not Timothy.”

“So, you’re Damian?”

“That is correct, child.”

From the kitchen, Eliana calls: “Jason, can you get the kids settled at the table? It’s almost done.”

“Yeah, I got ‘em!” Jason calls back, and he scoops up Milo before heading for the table.

Plopping the two of them into their booster seats, he looks around for the others.

“You guys gonna stay put while I go find the rest of the gremlins, or do you need a chaperone?”

Danny considers the question, his brow furrowing in thought, but Milo answers before he can come to a conclusion.

“Chap-rone,” he says. “Dami can stay with us.”

“Alright,” Jason says easily. “Dames, watch the kids.”

Damian looks at him with visible apprehension, but Jason doesn’t give a shit. He’s got three other kids to track down.

Beto’s in the quadlets’ room, playing with two Barbies that look like they’ve been through the nuclear apocalypse.

“Hey, kiddo, breakfast time.”

“Okay,” he says, putting the dolls down carefully. One of them has a homemade cardboard sword strapped to her back. The other has war paint.

“That’s new,” Jason says. “Lina get to them?”

Beto scowls. “She draftedthem into her stupid war.”

“Siblings, am I right?” Jason says, offering his hand.

Taking the hand, the kid lets out a long-suffering sigh and follows Jason to the table, where Milo is talking Damian’s ear off about art.

Mari is already in her seat.

“Morning, kiddo,” he says as he lifts Beto into his seat. “Seen your sister?”

“She’s in Mami’s room,” Mari tells him.

“The Eastern Front,” Danny says gravely. “They’re being pushed back.”

Jason whistles soundlessly. “They’re trying to trap them against the cliffs.”

Danny nods, eyes solemn. “It will be a great tragedy.”

“She’s gonna get them all killed,” Beto mutters angrily.

Jason pats him on the head soothingly, and then heads to Eliana’s room to get Lina.

Knocking on the door frame, he says: “Hey, there, General. How goes the day?”

Lina looks up from the Barbie freedom fighters she’s staging and says: “Not well. Isabella is trying to rally the survivors, but they’re getting pushed back. If they don’t turn the tides soon it’ll be a slaughter.”

“Oof. That’s a blow to the whole region.”

Lina nods in agreement, expression grim.

“Good time to take a pause?” he asks. “Breakfast’s almost done.”

She hums consideringly. “What’re we having?”

“That baked berry oat thing your mom makes.”

“Yeah,” Lina agrees, standing up quickly. “I can pause.”

Jason eyes the sprawling Barbie battlefield around her. “Need an airlift?”

She reaches her hands up wordlessly and Jason lifts her up over the Imperial lines to the clear ground on the other side.

“Thanks, Jay,” she says hugging his leg quick, and then runs off ahead of him.

Jason follows at a less breakneck pace and sits down just in time for Eliana to set the baking dish on the table.

“Ah, ah!” she scolds as Lina reaches for the serving spoon. “Too hot for little hands. Let Jay or I do it.”

Lina groans and Jason ruffles her hair with one hand and scoops some baked berry oat stuff onto her plate.

“Cream, General?”

“Yes!”

Jason pours some half and half over her pile of mush, then starts dishing some out to Milo, who’s still talking to Damian.

“Cream, mijo?”

Milo shakes his head.

“Alright. You good, Dames?”

Damian nods uncertainly. “Yes. Thank you.”

“You hungry? It’s vegetarian.”

“Oh. Yes. Thank you.”

“No problem, champ.”

“Milo, stop hogging Damian,” Danny complains. “I want to hear about Batcow!”

“But he hasn’t even told me about his show, yet!” Milo whines. “I want to hear about his show!”

Across the table, Damian stills.

“Kids, calm down. Milo, you get one more question, and then you have to let someone else talk to Damian, alright?”

“Ugh,” Milo says.

“How about your…TV show?” El says to Damian.

Damian stares at her like a deer in headlights.

“It’s an art show,” Jason says, pouring more cream onto his berry mush. God, this stuff is good. “One of his paintings was chosen for a new artists exhibition. It’s gonna be on display at a gallery in the Diamond District in a couple weeks.”

“Oh, wow!” El says, eyes wide. “Congratulations!”

“Thank you,” Damian says quietly, still a little frozen.

“What’s the painting of?” Mari asks.

“It—” Damian clears his throat. “It is a landscape. Of the desert. I—I apologize, I am caught off-guard. I haven’t,” his eyes flick to Jason, “told many people. And am using a pseudonym.”

“Oh, Talia told me.”

If anything, that seems to throw the kid off even more. “You discuss me with *Mother?*”

“Well, yeah,” Jason says awkwardly. “She likes talking about you. And Milo’s really into art right now, so. Sorry if you were trying to keep it on the DL.”

“I do not mind. I was merely trying to keep the information from becoming…public.”

Jason winces. “Right, yeah. Makes sense.”

Paparazzi swarming the gallery would put a damper on the whole thing. Plus, the thinly veiled accusations of nepotism, and the invasive questions, and—

Yeah, Jason got it.

“Why do you call your mom *Talia?*” Beto asks, and Jason chokes on his food.

“A simple misunderstanding,” Damian explains for him. “Jason and I are not blood brothers.”

Beto scrunches his face up, probably trying to figure out what *blood brothers* means.

“My mother adopted him,” Damian elaborates.

Jason almost chokes again. “Not, like, officially! …Right?”

Damian gives him a withering look. “Of course not *officially,* Todd. That would be impossible, considering you are *legally—”*

“*Damian*,” Jason snaps, then switches to the League dialect to say: “**Shut up, you little *brat.* They're *civilians.***”

“**Well, how was I supposed to know that?**” the kid argues back, taking Jason’s cue and also switching languages.

Jason shoots him a look that means *common sense, you moron,* then says: “**Apologize to our host for being rude.**”

Damian scowls, opening his mouth, but Jason cuts him off.

“Sorry, El,” he says, back to English. “Damian?”

The kid grumbles but says: “My apologies for bringing up such a… delicate topic at the table.”

“Apology…accepted?” Eliana says, glancing at Jason.

Mari, seemingly unbothered by the few minutes of tension, asks: “What language was that?”

“Arabic,” Jason tells her, grateful for the subject change. “Well, a dialect of it. It’s Dames’ native language. I learned it when I was living with his mom.”

“Oh, cool,” she says.

“If you and Dami have the same mom,” Lina says, “and you and Dickie have the same dad, does that make Dami and Dickie…step-brothers?”

“Perhaps, if marriage had been involved,” Damian says. “However, Richard, Todd, and I all share a father, so we are all brothers regardless.”

“Who’s Todd?”

Damian makes a face. “Jason.”

“Why do you call him Todd?”

“Because he’s a brat,” Jason says. “Mari, how was school yesterday?”

With a look to let him know that, yes, she knows she’s doing him a favor by changing the subject and she *will*be cashing in, Mari launches into a story about friend-group drama at her school, and Jason slumps a little in his seat, relieved.

The rest of breakfast is blissfully uneventful. When everyone’s done, Jason cleans the kitchen while El walks Mari to school.

Damian, to Lina’s delight, engages in warfare.

“Jay, Jay, Jay!” she yells, running into the kitchen and dragging Damian behind her. “She did it! Isa did it! Dami played her new advisor and they figured out how to push the Empire back!”

Jason grins, sweeping her up fast enough to get a second of airtime at the top. “That’s amazing! Long live the resistance!”

“Down with Imperial tyranny!” Lina screams, little fists in the air.

Jason laughs, head thrown back. Lina laughs with him for a moment, but quickly gets impatient.

“Down, down, Jay,” she says, squirming.

“Alright, alright.” He sets her down. “Give ‘em hell, General!”

“I will!” she yells, already running back to the front lines.

Jason reaches out to ruffle Damian’s hair, fast enough to get it nice and messy before the kid jerks away, snarling.

“Good job, kid,” Jason says. “The resistance was in a tough spot there.”

“They are *toys*, Todd,” Damian scoffs, but then adds: “The proximity of the cliffs did present an interesting challenge.”

“Sure did. Princess Isabella’s been the underdog from the start, but this might’ve been the worst position she’s had to defend. Lina wasn’t sure she could get them out of it.”

“Tt. The child has a strategic mind. She would have found the correct path with time.”

“Yeah, she’s a smart kid.”

“Yes,” Damian agrees.

The kitchen is quiet for a moment as Jason puts away the last of the dishes, Damian hovering a little awkwardly.

“I see why you hold this household in such high esteem,” he says finally. “They are…good people.”

And then, quieter: “A good family.”

Oh.

“It’s nice, right?” Jason says, side-eying the kid surreptitiously. “I mean, you and me, we never really got the whole normal family thing. Might’ve been nice.”

Damian stares at the floor for a long moment, then nods. “Yes. It might have been.”

“I know,” Jason starts, hesitates, then continues, “it wouldn’t be the same, but. You’re still a kid. If there’s any normal kid stuff you want to do, just to try it, we can.”

“Tt.” The kid crosses his arms over his chest. “We?”

“Sure,” Jason says easily. “I don’t have any plans today, do you?”

Damian narrows his eyes at him, suspicious, but then huffs and looks away.

“Very well. I would like to go to the zoo.”

“You got it, champ,” Jason says, already pulling out his phone. “Two tickets for the Gotham Zoo, coming right up.”

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When Jason first came back to Gotham, he came back alone, and, with

the exception of brief stints with the Outlaws, he's stayed that way since.

He was pretty good at convincing himself that he didn't mind, but he did. He hated every second of it. Hated the way the silence rang in his ears. Hated the way he still, after all these years, starts to turn every time he thinks of a joke, like there's still a shadow looming behind him he can tell it to.

Hated how the sight of the empty space Bruce used to fill has never stopped hurting.

Lately, though, he can't patrol more than two blocks without gaining at least one partner.

It's…nice.

Sometimes it's Dick or Steph, but most of the time it's Cass.

Tonight, it's Cass.

"Little brother," she says, suddenly, without warning, and directly in his blind spot.

Jason nearly has a heart attack.

"Jesus *Christ*, double B," he swears. "Don't *do that*. God."

Cass just tilts her head at him, clearly amused.

"Come on," she says. "Surprise."

"I don't like surprises," Jason complains, but follows her anyway.

She leads him on a wild chase south, to just about the dead center of the island, then ducks into an alley and *disappears*.

"The fuck?" Jason whispers, eyes darting around the space for a long minute before finally zeroing in on the steel access hatch.

On a hunch, he tugs off a glove and presses his palm to it and, sure enough, there's a faint *clunk*, and the whole panel hinges open.

Jason jumps in, nearly giddy.

The drop is longer than he thought it would be, but nothing a tuck and roll can't fix.

The space he drops *into*, though, that's more interesting.

"Is this a subway tunnel?"

Cass nods. "Was."

Abandoned, then. Sure looks it, too.

"Come."

"What, this wasn't the surprise?" Jason says, only half joking. The tunnel is a cool find. He's still trying to figure out the whys and hows of it. It looks too old to be part of the current subway system, the one that Thomas Wayne funded.

"Come," Cass says again, grabbing his hand this time and pulling.

Jason, still craning his neck to look at the ceiling, lets himself be dragged along.

A quarter of a mile or so down the tunnel, they hit what looks like a cave-in, but is actually a cleverly disguised door.

"Holy shit," Jason says as they step through onto the smooth, new pavement of a very different section of tunnel, lit with pale running lights. "New Bat, new Batcave, is that it?"

Cass shakes her head. "Bat Central."

"Oh, God, no. Please tell me you're not actually calling it that?"

Cass shrugs. "Nightwing."

Of course.

"We'll workshop it," Jason promises. "No way am I letting you idiots call it *Bat Central*."

The Depot, maybe. Or should they stick with the bats and birds theme? Rookery might work.

As he thinks about it, they approach an entrance that's actually, visibly an entrance, and Cass keys in her codes.

Jason follows her into the base, a little awed by it despite himself and having a little trouble convincing himself that they are actually still underground.

The ceiling is as high as the Cave's, but instead of bats it's studded with countless light fixtures that fully illuminate the large space. They must be full-spectrum, too, because there are *plants* of all things scattered around the place and they don't seem to be dying.

Hell, there's a whole ass lemon tree in one of the corners.

Tim's sitting at a sprawling desk next to the tree, typing lightning fast as he stares at one of the many screens in front of him. Instead of the austerity of the Batcomputer, there's an assortment of brightly colored superhero merch cluttering the desk and sticky notes *everywhere*.

"Good?" Cass asks.

"Yeah," Jason responds absently, eyes still scanning the room. "Yeah, it's—"

"Jase!"

Jason's gaze jerks to Dick immediately, a jolt of adrenaline hitting his system from the tone of his voice. Something's wrong.

Dick, sweaty locks of hair stuck to his forehead, is stepping towards him and off the sparring mat in the center of the room, wearing leggings and a crop top that's so brightly colored it makes Jason's eyes hurt to look at it. Dick's eyes dart—nervous? why is he nervous—from Cass, to Jason, to—

"What the fuck," Jason says flatly.

Dick, moving closer, puts his hands out in a placating gesture. "We were going to tell you, I swear. We just—"

"You let him adopt another fucking kid."

The kid in question rises to his feet from where he must've been knocked down *sparring with Dick*. He eyes Jason warily, but he doesn't seem afraid. He doesn't seem hurt either, but that—

That doesn't mean anything. There are plenty of ways to hurt someone that can be hidden under sweatpants and a tee. Plenty of ways that aren't physical at all.

"Jason," Dick says, reaching out, "just let me expl—"

Jason bats his hands away. "Fuck you, Dick."

“Jaybird—”

“Don’t fucking *Jaybird* me,” Jason nearly growls, shoving Dick back. “What the fuck is wrong with you?”

“Calm down, Todd,” Damian says, and Jason jerks his head around to spot him, standing with his arms crossed on the other side of the room.

Jesus. He didn’t even know the kid was here.

“Hey,” Dick says in his talking-to-victims voice. “Can you slow your breathing down for me, Jay?”

“What were you thinking, bringing him here, Cain?” Damian is saying harshly. “Are you a fool?”

“Hey,” Tim says sharply. “Back off, shrimp.”

At Jason’s side, Cass makes a confused sound.

“—to *breathe*, Jay, can you—”

Cass wraps a hand around Jason’s wrist, and he turns to meet her gaze. Her brow is crinkled a little, eyebrows upturned. She points at the kid on the sparring mat.

“New little brother,” she says, like it’s something Jason should be happy about. Like it’s not a fucking tragedy. Like that kid—

Jason rips his arm out of her grasp, stepping away.

Jesus. He doesn’t know these people at all.

“Jason, Jason,” Dick is saying. “You need to calm down.”

“Don’t tell me to *calm down*,” Jason snaps. “What the fuck, Dick? What the *fuck?*”

“I know, I know, it was a little sudden, but Duke’s a good kid—”

“Then you should’ve kept him the fuck away from us!” Jason says, louder than he means to. “Tell me he’s not living there. Tell me you at least kept him out of the fucking Manor, Dick.”

“Jase, I swear, Bruce hasn’t touched him, he won’t ever—”

“You don’t know that,” Jason says, angry and desperate in equal measure. “Even if you were in the Manor—”

“I do,” Dick insists. “I know, I would know.”

“Bull*shit*.”

“Jason, I—”

“No,” Jason snaps. “No, Dick, you wouldn’t fucking know, because you’re a fucking *moron* and you’re going to let it happen *again*. You’re going to let him get away with it *again*.”

“Jason, I get why you’re upset, but I swear—”

“Shut up, just—He’s living in the Manor, and you’re not, and you’re saying it’s okay? That everything’s okay?”

“Yeah,” Dick says, and Jason punches him in the mouth.

“Whoa!” Tim says, standing up so fast half a dozen superhero Funko Pops go flying onto the ground.

“Todd!”

“No,” Cass says firmly, yanking Jason back by an elbow, hard enough to hurt.

“What the fuck, man?” the kid—Duke—says, and, fuck *me,* that accent —

“Here’s a piece of advice, Narrows,” Jason tells the kid. “Run. While you still can.”

Duke meets his gaze levelly. “I’m good where I am, thanks.”

Shaking his head, Jason yanks his arm out of Cass’s grip.

“Your funeral,” he tells the kid.

Dick, ignoring Tim’s fussing over his bleeding lip to stare at Jason, makes an objecting sort of sound, and Jason nearly tries to hit him again.

Instead, he says: “Fuck the rest of you, and stay out of the fucking Alley.”

And then he leaves.

Chapter End Notes

Surprise!

I'm leaving Duke untagged for a little while at least to not spoil it, but don't worry, we'll be seeing a lot more of him next chapter.

# Chapter 5

Chapter Summary

> “For what it’s worth, I didn’t think it was a good idea either,” Steph says after a long beat of silence. “I got outvoted.”
>
> “Oh, there was a vote.” Jason slams the tin of loose leaf down onto the counter harder than is strictly necessary. “Without me. Wonderful.”
>
> “That was a joke,” Steph says quickly. “There wasn’t a vote. We wouldn’t—”
>
> “I don’t care,” Jason snaps, whatever calm he managed to cultivate since he got home quickly starting to evaporate. “I’m done. I’m fucking done, Steph. We just never fucking learn, do we? Just—just make the same mistakes, over and over and over.”
>
> He shakes his head once, hard, hands gripping the edge of the counter so hard it hurts.
>
> “Well, not me. Not anymore. I’m done.”

Chapter Notes

> Hey! Sorry for the horrifically long wait lmaooo I honestly have no excuse.
>
> Hope you like the new installment!

See the end of the chapter for more notes

A couple years ago, he probably would’ve gone on a fucking rampage, but he’s been working on his impulse control and shit, so he goes home instead.

He strips off his gear and cleans it, the movements so practiced it’s its own kind of meditation.

He does his fucking breathing exercises, and then he fucking does them again, and then he takes a long, hot shower and tries not to think about anything at all.

When he steps out of the bathroom in sweats and a soft jersey t-shirt,

hair still dripping, Stephanie Brown is occupying one of the stools at his kitchen counter.

He closes his eyes for a second, exhaling, then steps into the kitchen and starts making the cup of tea that's the next step in his calm-the-fuck-down routine.

"For what it's worth, I didn't think it was a good idea either," she says after a long beat of silence. "I got outvoted."

"Oh, there was a vote." Jason slams the tin of loose leaf down onto the counter harder than is strictly necessary. "Without me. Wonderful."

"That was a joke," Steph says quickly. "There wasn't a vote. We wouldn't—"

"I don't care," Jason snaps, whatever calm he managed to cultivate since he got home quickly starting to evaporate. "I'm done. I'm fucking done, Steph. We just never fucking learn, do we? Just—just make the same mistakes, over and over and over."

He shakes his head once, hard, hands gripping the edge of the counter so hard it hurts.

"Well, not me. Not anymore. I'm done."

"Jay, come on, I'm on your—"

Jason laughs, hard and ugly. "If you were about to say you're *on my side,* save it."

"I *am,* though," Steph insists. "I—"

"You fucking lied to me," Jason says, louder than he means to. "You sat at my fucking table and ate my *fucking food* and you lied to my face. For *weeks*."

There's no way Dick would have the kid in full-contact spars without at least a few weeks of training under his belt.

It's educated, but it's still a guess, and there's a moment where he hopes, just a little that Steph will deny it.

Steph doesn't deny it.

"Why?" Jason asks, devastated and desperate not to show it. "Did you think it was funny? Did you have a fucking betting pool going or

something? ‘Jason, the family idiot. How long do you think it’s gonna take him to figure it out? How stupid do you think he can *fucking be?*”

He snorts a bitter laugh, shaking his head again, and grabs the kettle, pouring hot water into his cup.

“Hope you said three-weeks-stupid,” he says, sharp, acidic, “‘cause, *ding ding ding—”*

“We knew you’d be fucking unreasonable about it,” Stephanie snaps. “Like you’re being *right now*.”

“Unreasonable?” Jason says, huffing a breathless laugh. “Oh, no, Blondie, this isn’t me being unreasonable. You’ve never seen me be *unreasonable.*”

Steph scoffs. “You’re always unreasonable. Grow up.”

Jason finishes pouring and drops the kettle back onto the stove with a harsh *clang.* His teeth are grinding together in a way that can’t possibly be good for them.

“Stop being a baby about this, come on—”

“Get out,” Jason says, voice hard.

Steph sighs, sounding exasperated. “Jason—”

“Get *out,* Stephanie,” Jason repeats, louder.

“I’m not—”

Jason punches the fucking fridge.

It’s the least breakable thing in the kitchen, which means it also is the best thing in the kitchen at breaking his hand, but that’s immaterial.

He punches it again, then twice, three times in rapid succession: *bangbangbang,* louder even than the pulse roaring in his ears.

The stool legs scrape against the linoleum, making an ugly, grating sound as Steph shoves back from the counter.

Blood trickles down the fridge from where Jason’s fist is still pressed against the red-smeared, off-white door.

“Jesus, Jason—”

“I swear to fucking God,” Jason says, volume tightly restrained, “if you don’t get out of my house in the next ten seconds, Stephanie Brown, I’ll throw you out the goddamn window.”

“Jason, you need to calm down—”

“I’ll calm down when you get the fuck out,” Jason snarls, finally turning to face her. “Ten. Nine.”

“Jason,” she says urgently, “your eyes—”

“Fuck you, Brown,” Jason says viciously, slamming his hand down on the counter between them, holding eye contact.

The flinch is small, but it’s there.

“*Eight,*” Jason snarls.

“Okay, I’m going!” Steph says, hands in the air. “I’m going. Jesus.”

“Seven,” Jason says, and then she’s through the window and gone.

He takes one deep breath, two, watching the window frame to make sure she’s really gone, and then he breaks every goddamn thing in his apartment.

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“Haven’t seen the Blue or Purple Rangers around in a couple days,” Jess says between drags.

“Hn,” Jason says. “You don’t need them.”

She gives him a considering look he doesn’t know how to interpret, then takes another drag and turns her gaze back to the street.

“No,” she agrees. “But the kids like them.”

She glances at him again.

“You seemed to like them, too.”

“Temporarily insanity. Must be something new in the water.”

Jess rolls her eyes, but lets it go.

Mostly.

“You gonna be fine on your own?”

Jason huffs.

“Not on my own, am I?” he says, jerking his head at the cluster of leather-clad, white-banged 20-somethings emerging from a bar across the street. “One of many, now.”

There’s a moment of silence as they both watch the group walk down the street, knocking into each other’s shoulders, laughing. None of them look enough like him to ever mistake them for the real Red Hood. Half of them are black, at least a third are women, and the rest are either too skinny, too white, or nowhere near the correct height.

Jason itches to melt deeper into the shadows, but he stays at Jess’s side.

It doesn’t matter, anyway. None of them notice them. They turn the corner a minute later and disappear from view.

“You know that’s not what I meant,” Jess says, eyes fixed straight ahead.

Yeah, he knows.

“I’ve got other people,” Jason says, and he does. Most of them haven’t hit puberty yet, but they’re still human beings. It counts.

Plus, Roy and Eliana and Zahra.

“People that know?” Jess asks skeptically. “That you can be honest with?”

Well. Just Roy, then. When he’s in town.

And if he really needs to, he can always call Talia. It’ll be a little embarrassing, sure, but she’ll come.

“I’m just saying,” Jess says. “I get that family isn’t everything. And if what you need is to never see them again, I’ll be first in line to kneecap ‘em so you don’t have to. But people aren’t meant to be alone, Red. Don’t do that to yourself.”

“Yeah, yeah,” Jason says, smiling wryly. “’The lone wolf dies, but the pack survives.’ I get it.”

Jess rolls her eyes again. “God, you are *such* a Stark. Jon was probably your favorite character, too, wasn’t he?”

“Of course,” Jason says, grinning even though he’s never seen the show, and, honestly, has only a vague idea of which one Jon even is. “Have you seen the size of his sword?”

Jess shoves him, and he lets her, laughing.

“Don’t you have somewhere better to be?” she grumbles.

“Nah,” Jason says, lighting up a fresh cigarette. “I’m fine right here.”

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RH: gonna text you from a new civvie number

RH: don’t give it to anyone

AR: aye aye captain

AR: you good?

RH: fine

RH: tell the midget i said hello

AR: i’ll tell her you’re a sad repressed little man

RH: fuck you i’m not little

AR: 🎶 waitiiiing 🎶

RH: fine tell her i love her

RH: and i miss her very much

RH: also i bought her that video game she wanted

AR: ❤□❤□❤□

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He wishes he hadn't hit Dick.

Not because he, like, feels bad. He doesn't.

He *doesn't.*

It's just that, if he hadn't hit him, he'd have the high ground.

But he hit him, and now the image of Dick's bleeding face and that flash of sick surprise in his eyes when Jason's first made contact, that small, hurt sound he made when Jason implied he was going to get the new kid killed—

He *doesn't feel bad.*

But he shouldn't have hit him.

He shouldn't have—

"Jay, Jay, Jay!"

Little feet pound against fake wood floors as Danny runs into the kitchen.

"Hey, little man," Jason says, looking up from his cup of long-cooled tea. "What's up?"

"Can you get me a fruit snack? I can't reach."

Jason eyes him skeptically. He's still a little damp from bathtime. He must've gotten to go first, because the rest of the hoard is nowhere to be seen.

He's also acting shifty as hell.

"Are you allowed to have fruit snacks before dinner, mijo?"

"…Yes?"

"Nice try," Jason says, ruffling his hair.

The kid deflates.

“But Jay,” he whines. “I’m *hungry*.”

The kid’s not really hungry. Jason knows that.

He knows.

But knowing doesn’t make Jason feel any better about it.

“I’m not going to break your mom’s rule, buddy. But we can make a snack?”

Danny squints at him suspiciously. “What snack?”

“Um.” Jason slides off the stool he was nursing his cold tea on and opens the fridge. “You like carrots?”

“With white sauce.”

“Ranch? White with green specks in it?”

Danny nods. “White sauce.”

There’s no ranch in the fridge, and he doesn’t have any at his place, either.

What he *does* have, though, is a little window box herb garden.

It was a gift from Alfred, left on his doorstep the morning after the fight, along with a carefully packed box containing two sets of four wine glasses of slightly different shapes, which he’s pretty sure mean one sets for reds and the other for whites.

Half of him had wanted to throw it all right into the dumpster, but he couldn’t bear the waste, especially after he’d trashed half his apartment in a temper tantrum like a fucking child.

Instead, he’d texted Dick *if i have to move because of you fuckers you’ll fucking regret it, never come here again,* then, a minute later, added *tell alfred to go fuck himself,* and then snapped the sim card in half.

He feels bad about it almost immediately, but not because he didn’t mean it.

He was an idiot to trust him, but he did, anyway.

Bruce comes first. Bruce *always* comes first.

Jason's always known, if it came down to a choice, Alfred would choose Bruce.

But he thought—

Hell, he doesn't know what he thought. All he knows is it feels like a fucking knife in his back, knowing that Alfred came over and sat at his table and talked about what he'd been reading lately and the whole time he *fucking knew,* and he didn't tell him, he didn't—

"Give me a second," Jason tells Danny. "I need to run to my place."

"Can I come?"

"Sure," Jason says, preemptively scooping the kid up and settling him on one hip.

"El!" he yells. "I'm kidnapping Danny for a minute!"

"Only a minute?" she yells back, mock disappointed, then, probably not directed at him: "Take that out of your mouth right now, young man!"

"Oven's still on, but I'll be right back!"

"Okay, mi—No! Beto, stop that!"

She'll be fine.

Probably.

The trip between the two apartments is barely a dozen steps, so she can always come get him if she needs something.

He plops Danny down on the counter when they get to Jason's kitchen and grabs the planter box off the windowsill.

Dill, parsley, chives, and a little garlic, all minced. Onion powder. Sour cream, mayo, milk, salt, pepper, and a couple squeezes of lemon juice, plus a bit of the zest just for the hell of it.

When it's all whisked together, he dips a clean spoon in and hands it over for judgement.

Danny licks it, then nods seriously. "White sauce."

Jason grins. "White sauce."

When they get back to El's place, the baththime shenanigans seem to have calmed down, but the kitchen's still empty, so Jason just sets Danny onto one of the stools at the counter and makes a plate of carrots and dip for two.

Well, one and a half.

Danny chomps on his carrots contentedly for a few minutes, but eventually says: "Jay? Are we still gonna get to see Batcow?"

Oof.

Jason shoves a whole baby carrot into his mouth to stall.

He has no idea what to tell him. They probably won't get to see Batcow, now. That's—

He's sorry, for that.

He knows Danny was really excited about it.

A tiny hand pats Jason's arm clumsily, startling him a little.

"Do you want a hug? Mami always hugs me when I'm sad."

Is he sad?

…Maybe he is.

"Sure, little man," Jason says. "I'll take a hug."

Danny clambers right up on top of the counter between them and wraps his arms around Jason's neck.

Jason squeezes him a little, then lets go.

"Thanks, mijo. Now get those feet off the counter before your mom sees and puts us both in time out."

Danny giggles but climbs back down onto the stool without complaint.

They eat a couple more carrots, then Danny says: "Are you really not friends with Dami anymore, Jay?"

Well, he and Damian were never exactly *friends*.

"It's complicated," Jason settles on.

Danny frowns at him. “That’s just what grown-ups say when they don’t want to explain.”

Jason huffs a tiny laugh. “Yeah, bud, it kind of is, isn’t it?”

He thinks for a moment to no avail, then says: “How do you know about that, anyway?”

“Dickie texted Mami about it,” Danny says plainly. “Mari reads all Mami’s texts.”

“Of course she does,” Jason sighs. “What did he say?”

“He said that you had a fight with *all* your siblings, and that you weren’t talking to them, and he asked Mami to look out for you, and he said it was a *so* bad fight and he was scared you might move away. Are you gonna move away?”

“No,” Jason says quietly, scrubbing a hand over his face. “No, I’m not gonna move away.”

“Good,” Danny says, mouth full of half-chewed carrot. “You have to keep making white sauce. And pancakes.”

Jason laughs and ruffles the kid’s hair.

“What did you fight about?”

Yikes.

“It was…it was about a lot of things. Me and my siblings, we were never like you quadlets and Mari. We didn’t grow up together, and we don’t always understand each other.”

“The fight was because you didn’t understand each other?”

“Sort of. More like…” Jason frowns. “More like, I thought we understood each other, but it turns out we didn’t. I think maybe—”

Jason swallows hard, suddenly feeling overwhelmed.

“I think maybe they’ve never understood me,” he says quietly, “and I’ve never understood them. I think…I think we’re maybe better off on our own.”

There’s a moment of silence, and then Danny climbs back up onto the counter and hugs Jason again.

“I’m sorry, Jay. That’s really sad.”

“Yeah,” Jason manages, throat tight. “Thanks, Danny.”

From the doorway, El says: “My turn.”

Danny lets go, and El pulls Jason into a tight hug.

“Homemade ranch?” she says, not letting go.

“Gourmet,” Jason says, voice rough. “Fresh herbs.”

“Kiss ass,” she mutters, low enough Danny can’t hear.

Jason chokes on an embarrassingly wet laugh.

“Danny, get your feet off the counter,” El scolds. “And go round up the others for me, would you? Dinner will be ready in ten minutes.”

“Okay, Mami,” Danny says, scrambling down from the counter, using the drawer handles as footholds.

Little footsteps patter down the hall and Jason lets his head drop onto El’s shoulder, one hand fisted in the back of her sweater.

After a minute, he says: “How much of that did you hear?”

“Enough to know that Dick wasn’t exaggerating when he said he fucked up.”

Jason snorts weakly.

“You know Mari reads your texts?”

“Don’t get me started. I can’t figure out how she keeps guessing the passcode.”

“Finger smudges,” Jason says, voice muffled a little. “Make a habit of wiping the screen with your sleeve before setting it down. Should work.”

El squeezes him tighter for a moment, then pulls back, holding him by both shoulders.

“Stay over tonight,” she demands. “Take the couch. We can watch a movie after the kids go to sleep.”

There are things he should be doing, probably, but someone else will take care of them.

“Okay,” he agrees, rubbing a hand over his face. “Okay.”

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“Dick texted you,” Jason says after the movie’s over. Eliana’s making hot chocolate and he’s leaning against the counter awkwardly, not used to being the one standing around watching someone else cook.

“Dick texted me,” she confirms.

“Can I see it?”

She passes over her phone wordlessly, already open to the message chain.

*hi eliana, this is dick,* it starts, even though she obviously already has his number since he texted her after the whole dissociating incident.

*jason and i had a really bad fight and i was hoping you check on him bc he was really upset but i don’t think he wants to talk to me right now. tysm for looking out for him these last few months, i worry about him so much and it’s good to know he has a friend like you. thanks again, and if he asks, please tell him i love him and i’m so so sorry and i’m here whenever he wants to talk*

On a hunch, Jason checks the timestamp. Just like he guessed, it’s dated just a few minutes after Jason stormed out of Bat Central. Maybe even before he got home.

The next one is dated less than an hour later.

*hi eliana, it’s me again sorry to bother you, and extra sorry if i wake you up, but please DO NOT go to check on jason until you hear from me!!! long story but i’m not sure his apartment is safe for—*

Jason tosses the phone down on the counter, disgusted.

“The second one?” El asks.

“Yeah. He’s a fucking moron. And an asshole.”

“That bad?”

Jason exhales roughly and wishes he had something to do with his hands.

“Can I tell you something?” he says quietly, staring at the floor.

“Whatever you want to tell me, you can tell me.”

Jason chews on his lip. It’s not that he *wants* to tell her. Not that he *doesn’t* want to tell her. Just—

“I—”

Jason stops, swallows, tries again.

“When I—Hn. The thing is, I—”

“If you’re trying to work up to telling me you’re the Red Hood, I already know.”

Jason jerks his head up to look at her, but she’s focused on the hot chocolate.

“You—what? How?”

At that, she does look over, smiling just a little, almost apologetic.

“Mijo, you leave your suit to air dry by your bathroom window after it rains.”

“What? No, I—”

Jesus fuck.

He does do that. Did he really—

“When did I…?”

“A few weeks ago, when my lock broke? I asked to use your bathroom. I think you were a little distracted.”

“A little?” Jason says incredulously. “I didn’t notice even *after*.”

There’s no way. How would—

“You had the little guy.”

Darius.

“He had colic.”

“Shit,” Jason exhales, laughing. “Yeah, he did. I can’t believe—Jesus. If B knew I was that careless, he’d *murder me*—”

The words register in his head only after he says them, and it immediately stops being funny.

“Here,” El says quietly, handing him a full mug.

She herds him to the couch, then curls into the corner so she’s half facing him, and she waits.

“B,” Jason starts eventually. “Batman. He, uh. Found me, when I was a kid. On the street. I’d like to think he saw something in me, or…I don’t know. I think he was just lonely. He and the first Robin weren’t on speaking terms, back then. I think he missed him more than he realized.”

He looks down at the mug for a minute, takes a sip, then a breath.

“I didn’t last very long as Robin. It was—all in all, it was less than three years, but it felt like a whole lifetime. Was, kinda. Given I…died. At the end.”

“Do you want to talk about it?” El asks gently, but Jason shakes his head.

“Not that part. Not—It doesn’t matter anymore. I died, and I came back, and no one knows how. But after—*after*, Damian’s mom, she found me, took me in. Her family, they have these things called Lazarus Pits. Essentially, magic healing ponds, but they come with a cost.”

“A cost,” Eliana repeats softly.

Jason nods.

“It’s…hard to describe. It’s like—it’s like there’s something else in your head with you. It doesn’t talk, it’s not like possessing you or something. It just—B calls it Lazarus Pit *Madness*, and he’s not…*wrong*. When it was bad, for me…I was more than a little insane, probably. I hurt people. Most of them deserved it. Some of them…didn’t.”

He takes a sip of his hot chocolate, then says, voice quiet: “That’s

what Dick was worried about. He thought I would hurt you if you came over to check on me that night."

"You wouldn't have," El says, no doubt in her voice at all.

Jason shoots her an aggrieved look.

"No," he agrees. "But I'm more than a little concerned about your self-preservation instinct, now."

"I *know you*, mijo," she says, quiet but firm. "You're a good person, and you're so, so careful. You…watch yourself. All the time. You think I haven't noticed? If a time comes when you're a danger to us, you'll get yourself somewhere we're not, and we'll be fine."

She smiles a little. "I trust you, Jason. Always."

Jason swallows hard, throat working.

"You don't mean that," he manages. "You can't mean that."

"I do," she insists.

Jason closes his eyes, breathing a little shaky.

"Do you want another hug?"

Jason nods jerkily, and El pulls him over to her end of the couch, wrapping her arms around him.

"It's okay," she says quietly, "if you need to cry, cry. It's not healthy to hold it in."

"Been working fine for me so far," Jason says into her shoulder.

El laughs, and Jason does, too, until suddenly he's not laughing.

"There you go," El murmurs, rubbing a hand over his shaking back.

"The kids," he manages to get out.

"What about them?" El says, dismissive. "They sleep like the dead. And even if they wake up, it'd be good for them to see a big strong boy like you cry. Keep them from getting wrong ideas."

Jason laughs a little, then cries a little more, and then finally gets his lungs to calm the fuck down.

El pats his back sympathetically, then gets up and says: “Stay right there, let me get you some water.”

Jason does as he’s told, and when she gets back, he drinks half the glass in one long gulp.

“Jesus fuck,” he complains. “That shit’s exhausting. How do the kids do it all the time?”

“The trick is to not let it build up for…most of your adult life?”

Jason huffs a laugh.

“Most of my childhood, too.”

“Batman didn’t let you cry?”

“B? Nah, he was never that kind of shitty. He wouldn’t have known what to do, and probably would’ve been awkward as hell about trying to comfort me or whatever, but he would’ve been nice about it. My old man used to smack me around for crying, when I was Mari’s age.”

“I’m sorry. He shouldn’t have done that.”

“Yeah, he was kind of an asshole,” Jason half laughs. “Fine when I was little. But he came back from Blackgate different. Mean as all hell.”

“My father was the same,” El says. “Well, not the same, but—Different, after. He shot himself a few months after getting out.”

“Jesus,” Jason swears closing his eyes for a second. “I’m sorry, El.”

She shrugs minutely. “It was a long time ago. But thank you.”

“Yeah. Fuck. You, too.”

They sit in comfortable silence for a few minutes, leaning against each other on the couch, and then El says: “Did you want to read the rest of Dick’s texts?”

Jason pushes himself more upright. “Wait, how many did he send you?”

“Five or six.”

“Fucking *dickhead.*"

“And he left a voicemail.”

“Dear Lord.”

“Must’ve been one hell of a fight.”

“Yeah,” Jason sighs, leaning back against the couch again.

“Here,” El says, handing over her phone.

Jason takes it and scrolls up to the last one he read.

*hi eliana, it’s me again sorry to bother you, and extra sorry if i wake you up, but please DO NOT go to check on jason until you hear from me!!! long story but i’m not sure his apartment is safe for you or the kids right now*

It pisses him off just as much the second time around, but he keeps reading. The next morning, probably right after Jason texted Dick, there’s a series of texts sent in rapid succession: *nvm you’re all clear.* Then: *i was overreacting sorry*. And finally: *please don’t tell jason i was worried*

Jason scoffs quietly.

“After that one is the voicemail, if you want to go in order,” El says, leaning over to see where he’s at.

A fucking *voicemail.*

Jesus, Dick.

“Hi, Eliana! This is Jason’s brother, Dick,” the recording starts, and Jason has to fight the urge to cringe at Dick’s obviously fake, happy-go-lucky act. “I don’t know if you got my texts, I mean—”

There’s an awkward, nervous, slightly manic laugh, then a rustling sound, like Dick shifted or stood up. Jason can almost picture him starting to pace.

“I’m sorry if I scared you. Jason—Jason cut me off. He—”

Dick’s voice breaks a little on the recording, and there’s an audible breath.

“He cut all of us off. The whole family. Even—even our grandfather, and he’s never done that before, he’s never—Sorry. I’m just—I’m

really worried about him. I don't know—I don't know if he's going to forgive me anytime soon, or—or ever, really, so. Please keep an eye out for him. And if he asks, if he—I know he probably doesn't care, but if he asks, please tell him that I love him, no matter what happens. Even if he never wants to see me again, I will never stop loving him."

On the recording, Dick takes a shaky, wet-sounding breath, and then says: "Okay. Thanks, El. Say hi to the kids for me."

And that's it.

There's only one text after that, from a whole day later:

*i'm not trying to get you to report on him or anything, i promise, but please lmk if you don't see him for a couple days, or if you have reason to believe he's left the city. i won't contact him, i just need to know he's safe.*

Jason stares at it for a long moment, then hands the phone back to El.

"Better or worse?" she asks.

He rubs a hand over his face, exhausted.

"Neither, really," he says. "He's just—"

He shakes his head, frustrated.

"He always thinks the problem is that I don't know he loves me or whatever, but that's not—that's not the fucking problem. The problem is that every time I think I can trust them, every time I let my guard down, they fucking sucker punch me. Every goddamn time. I just—Fuck, El, I don't know. I just feel like an idiot. I feel so fucking *stupid*. I can't—"

"Oh, sweetheart," El says as his voice breaks, wrapping her arms around him again. "You're not stupid, Jay. You're not."

"Then why do I still love them?" Jason says, voice strained. "It *hurts,* El. It's like they're stabbing me in the chest every time, and every time I just come crawling back for more. Who fucking does that? Something is *wrong* with me."

El squeezes him tighter. "*Nothing* is wrong with you. Nothing. You just have a big heart, and a little bad luck."

More than a little, probably. A lot more than a little.

After a long few minutes, he says, quietly: “B took in a new kid. That’s what we fought about. Two years ago…Two years ago, he hit me until I stopped moving and then he *kept hitting me*. He cracked open my skull and broke five of my ribs and I almost bled out internally. Would have, if not for Roy, and Jess, and whoever else they roped into helping me. And now he’s got a new kid, and they didn’t tell me.”

He squeezes his eyes closed.

“None of them *fucking told me*,” he repeats, voice cracking.

El makes a low, concerned sound.

“I’m not even—I’m not even that worried he’s gonna hurt the kid. He’s new and shiny and probably on his best behavior, B’s not gonna hit him. At least not anytime soon. But B, he—he’s like a planet, and we’re all just fucking moons. He drags you in, and you can’t help but love him for it. For so long, I didn’t even care if he was hurting me, as long as he was looking at me like I was—like I *mattered*, even if he didn’t love me anymore. And that’s—El, that’s *so fucked*.”

Jason presses his forehead tighter against El’s shoulder, sniffling a little.

“It sucked so much. And I don’t want that for him. I don’t—I don’t want that for him. I don’t understand how the others could let him just walk into that. And I—I don’t know what to do.”

El hums a little, then says: “What do you want to do?”

“Go kick down his fucking door,” Jason admits. “But just the idea of it, of—of confronting him, it scares the shit outta me. If he—Fuck. *Fuck*.”

Jason closes his eyes and slows his breathing down.

“I’m not ready for that,” he says finally, miserably.

“Child services?”

Jason just scoffs.

“Fair,” El admits. “I have a friend who’s a case worker, though. I could get her to do a wellness check.”

That’s…not a bad idea. Jason’s pretty sure that between Bruce’s name and his money, CPS would never actually take a kid away from him,

but if El's friend would give him a copy of her report, it wouldn't matter. Jason would know.

He would know, and then he could figure out what to do about it.

Of course, he's pretty sure Bruce would never let anyone find any actual evidence, but El's friend would still get to talk to the kid. Get a read on him.

"You trust her?" Jason asks.

"I do."

"Okay. That's a good idea. We should—can you—?"

"I'll call her in the morning."

Good. That's good. It's pretty late, now, any—

"Fuck," Jason says, pulling away to check the time on his phone. "Jesus, I'm sorry. You should go to bed. You're barely gonna get any sleep before work."

"Don't be sorry," El says firmly. "I'm happy to give up a few hours of sleep to help you, Jason."

Jason doesn't know what to say to that.

"Thank you," he says finally, voice quiet. "But you really should go to bed."

El's brow knits a little, forehead crinkling. "You'll be okay on your own out here?"

"Yeah," Jason says, reassuring. "I'll be fine."

"Alright," El says a little reluctantly. "Wake me up if you need anything, okay?"

"I will," Jason says, even though he absolutely will not.

El gets up, then leans down to press a kiss to his forehead, like he's a little kid.

"Goodnight, mijo," she says. "Sleep well."

"Goodnight," Jason echoes. "You, too."

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El calls her friend the next morning, before she heads off to her mom's and then work, kids in tow.

Jason catches up on some laundry, does a little light hacking to look into a situation at the docks he's been keeping an eye on, then heads to the grocery store.

When he gets home, the new kid is sitting at his kitchen counter, doing homework.

"Sup," he says, not bothering to look up from his very new, very expensive laptop.

Jason would bet good money Bruce bought for him, and it puts a bad taste in his mouth.

He drops the grocery bags on the kitchen floor, the sound loud and harsh in his ears.

"What the *fuck* are you doing here, Narrows?" he demands.

The kid looks up at him, unimpressed, then right back down to his homework.

"One second," he says. "Let me finish this."

Jason makes a disbelieving sort of sound high in his throat, stuck between offended and confused.

He stares at the kid for a moment, expectant, then huffs, agitated, and starts putting away the groceries.

Finally, the kid closes the laptop.

"Gonna explain why you broke into my fucking apartment now, Narrows?"

"Well, you called CPS on me, so I think we're even," the kid says. "And my name's Duke."

Jason crosses his arms. "I didn't call *CPS*. My friend called her friend

who *works for* CPS. She's from the Narrows, she's a decent fucking person, and she's not gonna fuck you over."

Duke raises his eyebrows. "And I'm supposed to just believe that? It's CPS, man."

Jason narrows his eyes. "First off, I fucking know. I was in the system, too, squirt. Second, I killed all the caseworkers working with traffickers years ago. And third, I'm not an idiot. The city's not gonna snatch a kid from Bruce Wayne."

Even if they *should*, they kinda *can't*.

"Whatever, man," Duke says, rolling his eyes a little. "That's not even really what I'm here about."

"Well, what fucking is, then?" Jason snaps, annoyed.

Duke leans back on the stool, crossing his own arms. For the first time in this little encounter, he looks annoyed.

"What is with you people and your shitty communication skills?"

"Don't lump me in with them," Jason says hotly. "I'm not—"

"No," Duke cuts him off. "You're all always hiding behind like ten layers of bullshit."

"Fuck you, I'm not *hiding*—"

"Yes, you are," Duke argues, leaning forward, eyes intense. "You're not angry at me. Why the hell would you be? We don't even know each other. You're just acting pissed off because you're uncomfortable with expressing genuine emotion. You pretend like you're angry because it gets you a predictable response, but then you're somehow surprised when everyone keeps *assuming you're angry*. It's unproductive."

Jason stares at him, too taken aback to be properly offended.

"Well, fuck you, too, kid," he says eventually. "What are you, a fucking shrink?"

Duke rolls his eyes. "It's, like, *really* obvious, man. You—*all of you*—are just too caught up in your repeating cycles and shit to see it, and it's honestly kinda annoying."

“And you’re not? Aren’t you part of B’s fucking circus now, too?”

He shrugs. “I’m new. And everyone’s been pretty damn honest with me, which must be new, too, because it seems like 99% of your problems would be solved already if you’d all started doing that sooner.”

Jason huffs, but says: “Yeah, well. You’re probably not wrong.”

“Probably?” Duke says wryly.

Jason scowls. “Well, get on with it, kid. What’d you come here to say?”

At that, the kid settles a little in his seat, like he’d rehearsed this part.

“Well, first of all,” he starts, “I didn’t know they didn’t tell you about me. That was messed up. They should’ve told you.”

Jason grunts, looking away.

“Second, it was fucked up that you sucker punched Dick like that, man.”

“Yeah,” Jason says quietly. “I know.”

He can feel the weight of the kid’s eyes on him for a good handful of seconds before he caves and looks up to meet them.

Whatever the kid sees, it must be enough for him. He nods and then moves on like nothing happened.

“Third, Dick did a shit job explaining the situation, and he knows that. Tim had to stop him from coming over here himself to explain. Good thing he didn’t though, ‘cause honestly? Pretty sure he would’ve made it worse. Again: ten layers of bullshit. Twenty, between the two of you.”

That startles a laugh out of Jason. Short, and a little bitter, but the kid’s right. He and Dick have never communicated well. They’re always reading each other wrong and jumping to conclusions and getting defensive. Jason’s grown enough to admit it’s a two-way street.

…It’s definitely mostly Dick’s fault, though.

“So, what’s the situation, then, kid?” Jason asks, prepping himself for

the kid to say some shit that's going make him want to bash Bruce's head in.

"I *am* living at the Manor," the kid says seriously, "but it's *temporary*. My cousin's working on getting custody, but there's a delay because he's got a record. Bruce has his lawyers working on it for us, and while we're waiting, Bruce has custody and *my responsible, adult cousin* and I are *both* staying with him. It was a decision that was made after Bruce told us what he did to you, and the steps he's taking to make sure he doesn't hurt anyone else."

Oh.

Well, that's—

That's much better than he'd expected.

"Fourth," Duke continues, "serious effort has gone into making sure that what happened to you never, ever happens again. Like, so much effort. Most of it by Bruce."

"Yeah, yeah," Jason says. "The old man's in therapy. Dickhead told me."

Duke's brow furrows. "I mean, yeah, he's going to therapy, but that's not what I'm talking about."

Jason shifts a little, leaning a little less of his weight against the edge of the counter, unsettled. He switches the cross of his arms.

"What, then?" he says, impatient.

"Well, to start, all members of the Justice League with younger or less experienced partners are required to meet with a League-approved psychologist at least four times a year: twice alone, and twice with each of their partners. The appointments are optional for partners over 18, but they're still encouraged."

"What, for real?" Jason says incredulously. "Like fucking couples counselling?"

Duke shrugs. "Essentially, yeah. Underage vigilantes working with Justice League members are also required to choose a secondary mentor unconnected to their primary so that they have someone else in the hero community to go to for advice or help. The League suggests weekly check-ins, but it's not super structured. Supposed to

be more organic."

"Huh," Jason says after a beat.

He sees how that could be…really helpful, actually.

If he had had someone else to go to, after Garzonas, would…would things have been different? He can't help but think about it, even though he usually tries to avoid those kinds of what-ifs these days, for the sake of preserving however little mental stability he's got left.

Jason clears his throat, shaking himself out of it.

"Who's yours, then?"

"Black Lightning," Duke tells him. "Our power sets aren't exactly the same, but their similar enough in combat that he's got some good insight. And there's some stuff he gets that Bruce kinda just can't, you know?"

Yeah, Jason knows. The privilege gap was always hard to cross, even when he and Bruce were at their closest, and he figures it's gotta be worse for—

"Wait, hold up," Jason says suddenly. "You're a *meta?"*

"Oh," Duke says, blinking. "Yeah. Forgot you didn't know. I do, like, light shit. And a little bit—" he holds his thumb and pointer finger slightly apart "—of precognition."

"You can tell the fucking *future?"* Jason says, incredulous.

"Just a little bit, I said," Duke defends, making a more exaggerated version of the same 'just a little' gesture.

"Wait, like—"

"—how much future are we talking?" Duke finishes with him, words overlapping perfectly with Jason's.

Jason stares at him, eyes wide.

"Less than a minute," the kid answers, like it's no big deal. "Dick thinks we can push it further out with practice, though."

"Holy shit," Jason mutters, running a hand through his hair. "Anything else you're casually leaving out?"

“Nah. Well, I can see the past sometimes, too, a bit. And I *might* be immortal.”

“Oh, just that?” Jason says, a little breathless. “Jesus, kid.”

Duke grins at him.

“C’mon, man,” he says. “You might be able to fool the others but you’re no stranger to magic. It’s practically dripping off you.”

Jason scowls. “So maybe a little rubbed off on me, yeah. That shit’s like sewer sludge—it fucking lingers. Doesn’t mean nothing.”

Looking amused, Duke says: “Uh huh. And those glowing swords on your back, those are—”

“Those were a gift,” Jason defends. “I’m not gonna refuse a *gift*. I wasn’t raised in a fucking barn.”

Duke fucking *laughs at him.*

“Shut the fuck up,” Jason says, but there’s no real bite behind it.

Hands up in surrender, laughter folded down into an ear-to-ear grin, Duke says: “Alright, alright. I got it. Jason Todd: perfectly normal, non-magical Gotham vigilante. I’m not gonna rat you out, man.”

“Better not,” Jason grumbles.

“Really, though, have none of the others ever noticed?”

Jason shakes his head. “Damian probably knows, or at least has a vague idea from Talia. But the others are about as un-magical as it comes, and it’s not like I go around wearing sigils and chanting in Latin. Not everyone has freaky magic super-vision.”

Duke laughs.

“No, seriously,” Jason insists. “I don’t think you understand exactly *how invisible* those swords are supposed to be. They’re attached to my soul and even *I* can’t see them most of the time.”

“Sounds like a skill issue,” Duke says, grinning.

“Oh, fuck off, you little shit,” Jason retorts, but he’s grinning, too, barely holding back a laugh. “Get the hell out of my house.”

Duke rolls his eyes, but actually starts packing up his stuff, and Jason's mood drops.

"I didn't mean—"

"Chill, man, I know," Duke says, half laughing. "I have to meet a classmate at the library to work on a group project."

Oh.

Good.

Duke hesitates after he finishes packing up his shit, though.

"I hope you know," he says, backpack already slung over his shoulders, halfway to the door, "I didn't come here to apologize for the others or, like, fix shit between you and them. I just…"

He shrugs a little, and Jason stays quiet, letting him find his words.

Trying to…be a better listener, he guesses.

"You called CPS," he says eventually, mouth curved in a wry smile. "And I know, with where you—*we*—grew up, you must've been pretty worried to do that, so. I didn't want you to worry too much or feel like you had to step in yourself."

"Well, thanks, squirt," Jason says, tone light but not really joking. "That was—that was pretty fucking decent of you."

Duke flashes him a smile, but he gets serious again quick.

"Bruce, he—He told me pretty explicitly what he did. Gave me the videos and the hospital records and stuff, and I'm sorry that he obviously didn't ask you before he did that, because he definitely should have and it was a huge invasion of your privacy and—"

"Easy, kid," Jason says. "It's alright, I'm glad he told you."

And it is.

Obviously, Jason doesn't *love* that Bruce is going around showing that shit to people, and, yeah, it would've been nice to be asked, but.

He's glad the old man's being upfront with the kid.

"Still should've asked you," Duke grumbles, but moves on. "Anyway,

point is: Bruce and Alfred and the rest, they've all made sure that I know, and they've put safeguards in place. Hell, Bruce won't even be alone in the house with me. If nobody else is gonna be around, he clears out. He's never hurt me, and honestly, I don't know if he would or not, I don't know him that well. But it doesn't matter, because he's never had the opportunity, and he never will."

"It's not," Jason starts, then wets his lip and starts over. "I'm not just worried about him hurting you, physically. He's—There are a lot of other ways to hurt people. Especially your kids."

Duke fidgets with his backpack straps, looking a little nervous.

"Can I, uh. Say something that might make you kinda upset?"

Jason frowns a little, but nods.

"From how the others talk about you, and from like, the stuff that everybody kinda knows about Red Hood, I'm guessing you didn't really have a lot of, like, stable adults in your life before Bruce?"

"Well, no," Jason says, frown deepening. "I mean, honestly…none."

That's kind of depressing, actually.

"Yeah, so," Duke continues, "it also doesn't seem like you had a lot of contact with other vigilantes, right? Like, not even Dick that much? And you never joined a team."

Jason grunts an affirmative, a little uncomfortable.

"Okay, so, don't take this the wrong way, but I think you're maybe projecting a little bit? Because, like, I get why, as a kid, under those circumstances, Bruce would be really, really important to you. Like, your-whole-world kind of important."

Jason feels his brow furrow tighter, but he's not *mad*. He's just… listening. Intently.

"But, man," Duke continues, hands out palm-up in a helpless sort of gesture, "he's not even my *dad*. I have a dad. I have a mom. And, yeah, they can't be in my life right now, maybe not ever again, but they were good parents while they were, and I'm *fifteen*. I'm not looking to replace them. Bruce is practically a stranger to me. He's not really capable of hurting me on, like, a deep, emotional level or anything, because he's kinda just…my landlord?"

Duke's eying Jason like he's trying to gauge how he's reacting to that, and Jason is…

Jason is not sure how he's reacting to that.

He thinks about what he said to Eliana last night, about Bruce being like gravity. About loving him so much it hurt. So much he didn't *care* that it hurt.

And for the first time, he wonders if the others would look at him like he was crazy if he said that in front of them.

He'd always thought they were all the same, in that regard. That Bruce was the center of all their universes. And maybe he wasn't wrong about that, but the others…

At the very least, the others' universes always seem to have a lot more shit in them. They're nothing like the lonely, 2-body system that Jason's was for—for a long time.

"So," Jason says slowly, "what you're saying is that I should add 'not making me make friends' to the list of things I should be pissed at him about."

Duke cracks a smile. "I mean, I think my therapist would phrase it more like 'not providing a stimulating and stable social environment and support structure,' but, yeah. Maybe."

Jason shakes his head, a little rueful.

"Yeah," he says. "You might have a point, kid."

Duke nods, smile fading into something more serious.

"Before I go, I just want to be sure we're clear: I get why you cut Dick and the rest of them out, and if you keep them cut out, we're still cool. Your overprotective ass does not have to make up with them just to keep an eye on me, yeah? I'm fine, I'm safe, and if you need to check in, just call or text or something like a normal person. If I need somebody to yell at Bruce, or hell, at *Dick*, I'll call Jefferson. That's kinda his job."

Fuck, Jason really wishes they'd been doing the emotional-support-superhero thing back in his day.

"Alright, kid," Jason says. "You gonna give me your number, then?"

Duke hands over a slip of paper that already has his name and number written out on it, like he always knew this conversation was going to end amicably, which is either creepy meta shit or optimism, and Jason's not sure which option is more unsettling.

"You know," Duke says over his shoulder as he heads for the door, "the Red Hood is on the League's list of former child vigilantes. They'll give you an appointment with one of their psychologists if you ask."

"Don't fucking push it, Narrows," Jason scoffs, shoving the kid's head to the side so lightly it's honestly a little embarrassing.

The kid grins, stepping through the door.

"I'll let them know you'll be calling soon."

Jason flips him off, and the kid laughs, bright and loud.

"See you around, Alley," Duke says, and then Jason closes the door and leans his forehead against the cool wood for a moment, eyes closed.

He has a lot to think about.

Chapter End Notes

> Tysm to everyone who left kudos and comments over the long break—so fun to see all the different takes and predictions and honestly so helpful to motivate faster writing. Love you all and see you in hopefully-less-than-14-months!

# Chapter 6

Chapter Summary

> “Those things will kill you, you know.”
>
> Johnny flinches hard, jerking away from the voice, head whipping around, Zippo flinging itself out of his hand and—
>
> Red Hood snags it out of the air before it can go over the edge.
>
> “Jesus,” Johnny says, breath short in his chest. “Give a guy a little warning next time, yeah?”
>
> “Where’s the fun in that?” Hood says, amusement apparent even through the helmet’s filter.

Chapter Notes

> What? No, the chapter count has always been 9. Hahaha...nope, don't know what you're talking about. Always been 9.
>
> (Tags have been updated with a couple new content warnings.)

See the end of the chapter for more notes

Johnny shoulders open his building’s roof access door, looking down at his hands as he shakes a cigarette out of the pack. The door’s supposed to be locked, probably, given the NO ROOF ACCESS sign, but it never is and the super’s never hassled Johnny about it, so she either doesn’t know or doesn’t care.

Regardless of how useful it is for smokers, though, the door really should be locked, probably. At the very least, there should be signs up in the stairwells with hotline info and shit.

Carlos brought up some stats he’d read about suicide prevention tactics the other day and out of all of them, the roof access ones sounded like a good place to start. Between all the Red Hoods, there’s already someone in most buildings in the neighborhood, and what super would object to a sign like that if a tenant asked for it? Probably one they should keep an eye on anyway, so—

“Those things will kill you, you know.”

Johnny flinches hard, jerking away from the voice, head whipping around, Zippo flinging itself out of his hand and—

Red Hood snags it out of the air before it can go over the edge.

"Jesus," Johnny says, breath short in his chest. "Give a guy a little warning next time, yeah?"

"Where's the fun in that?" Hood says, amusement apparent even through the helmet's filter.

"Asshole," Johnny mutters, then immediately thinks better of it. "Fuck. Sorry. I—"

"Relax, man."

Looking awfully relaxed himself, Hood reaches up to take the helmet off, setting it on the low wall at the edge of the roof.

Johnny's never seen him in just the little eye mask before, and there's a single instant where he's terrified he's going to recognize him.

He doesn't, but Jesus Christ, just thinking about it makes him queasy. Sure, he's had to make peace with the possibility of Mask or somebody trying to get info on Hood out of him, but it's always been info he *doesn't have,* which is a different kind of terrifying than being tortured for information he *does* have.

"If I shot everyone who called me an asshole," Hood says wryly, oblivious to Johnny's frantic internal estimation of how quickly he'd break under torture, "I'd go broke buying ammo."

His voice deeper than Johnny would've expected, given how young he looks. It's got a bit of a gravelly sort of rasp to it, which is rapidly explained by the pack of cigs he pulls out of one of his bajillion pockets.

He lights up with Johnny's lighter before holding it out.

Johnny takes it back, barely managing not to fumble it again, then lights up his own cigarette. Unsure what to say, he settles on nothing at all, and they smoke in silence for a minute.

Finally, Hood says: "Listen, I need a favor."

"…What kind of favor?"

Hood looks at him for a moment that seems to drag on for hours.

“You do construction, yeah?” he asks finally.

Johnny shrugs. “When there’s work, sure.”

“I need a crew I can trust to do a job quiet,” Hood says. “Some demo, full insulation, plumbing, HVAC.”

He pulls a handful of sheets of paper out from an inside pocket of his jacket and holds them out for Johnny to take.

Johnny steps just close enough to take them, then back again, because his mama might’ve taught him not to be rude, but she’d also taught him not to be *stupid.*

Shifting through the papers quickly to get some sort of idea of what’s going on, he sees some rough floor plans and labor estimates, annotated with a shit ton of notes, all written in a neat, blocky print.

“Okay,” Johnny says slowly, still looking the papers over.

“I need it done ASAP. Before it gets cold.”

“I’m no contractor,” Johnny admits. “But this looks like a lot of work for…what? A month?”

“I know,” Hood says.

He leans over Johnny’s shoulder, close enough that he can smell him, and taps the page in Johnny’s hand.

“I’m willing to compensate for the rush,” he says, and Johnny blinks, confused for a minute, preoccupied with *sweat and leather and Johnson & Johnson baby shampoo and—*

He blinks again, and finally focuses back in on the page, on the part of the page Hood tapped, on the—

“Holy shit,” Johnny blurts out. “Dude, you could get, like, literally anyone to do this at those rates.”

“I don’t need *anyone*,” Hood says, leaning on the wall with one elbow, half turned away from Johnny. “I need people I trust, but there ain’t enough of those for this.”

He takes another drag of his cigarette, nearly at the end of its life now,

and stares out over the city.

“I’m figuring,” he says slowly, “that people *you* trust are my next best option.”

Johnny stares at him, eyes wide. He swallows hard.

“Um,” he says finally, voice a little rough. “Thanks, man. That—that means a lot.”

Hood shrugs, like it’s no big deal.

“I mean,” Johnny says, a little helpless, “you don’t even *know* me.”

Hood scoffs a little, pulling out another cigarette.

“Mind if I borrow that lighter again?” he asks, turning around to lean back against the wall instead, facing Johnny, who hands over his lighter wordlessly.

Hood lights up and takes a drag. Exhales slowly.

“When you were fourteen,” he says, finally, “you threw a brick at a man cornering a girl in an alley.”

Johnny stares again, startled.

“Got the shit kicked out of you for your trouble,” Hood continues. “Got away, but ended up in the hospital. Must’ve known you were gonna, yeah? He was a lot bigger than you.”

“How the *fuck* do you know that?” Johnny says, disbelieving.

“Doesn’t matter,” Hood says. “What matters is that the kid got away. Left you there, alone with him, but she got away, and I bet you’ve never regretted it. Have you?”

No. No, he’s never regretted it.

“*That’s* what I’m looking for,” Hood says emphatically. “That’s what I need for this. People who do the right thing, not just for clout in front of your little club or whatever, but when it’s inconvenient. When it could get them hurt, or worse. When they know they won’t get anything good out of it at all, but they *do it anyway*.”

Pure white lenses lock onto Johnny’s eyes like a physical force.

“Can you find me some more people like that, Johnny Sheehan?”

Johnny stares for a beat, frozen, then shakes himself out of it and nods.

“Good,” Hood says, then smiles at him wryly. “Make sure they can actually do the work, too, yeah?”

“Will do, boss,” Johnny says, still feeling a little like this is some weird dream.

Hood freezes, the tight line of his shoulders making the hair on the back of Johnny’s neck stand up for a second.

“I’ll check in with you tomorrow night,” Hood says, still tense, and yanks his helmet back on. “Thanks, Johnny.”

Johnny opens his mouth to respond, but before he can get a word out, Hood’s vaulted up on the low wall at the edge of the roof and dropped right off the edge.

“Huh,” Johnny mutters, rolling his shoulders to shake off some tension. “Weird.”

Weird is kind of par for the course, though, considering. He rolls his shoulders again, shakes out his hands a little, then pulls out his phone and dials.

“Hey, Carlos,” he says. “How do your next few weeks look?”

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The truth is, Jason’s been feeling off since Duke dropped by his apartment. After their conversation, Jason had given himself one more day to sulk, then pushed the tangled mess of raw emotion and half-formed thoughts into a box and got to work.

It was already October, and he had way too much shit to do. He figured he’d deal with it later.

Unfortunately, the *ignore it and hope it goes away* approach, which had always worked flawlessly (well, mostly flawlessly) for him in the past, had very much *not worked flawlessly*.

He'd been jumpy. *Reactive*, according to the internet. Triggered by things so little he couldn't always even figure out what they were, even afterwards.

Like whatever the hell set him off on Johnny Sheehan's roof.

He holds it together long enough to land safely on his roof and get down the stairs, but once he's safe in his apartment it starts to go downhill pretty damn quick.

He peels off his suit and showers, scrubbing too hard in an attempt to force some awareness back.

It doesn't really work.

He pulls the bottle of peppermint oil out of the drawer of his bedside table and opens it, sitting on the edge of his bed for a long while in just a towel, bottle held right up against his nose.

That doesn't work, either.

He sits on the bed for a minute longer, trying and mostly failing to think of something else he can do, then gives up.

He gets dressed, then walks next door, already dialing El's number.

"Jason?" she answers blearily.

"Hi," he says quietly. "I'm at your door. Can you…"

There's a scrambling sort of sound on the other end of the line, and a few seconds later the door opens.

"Hi," he says again, not meeting her eyes.

"Come in, come in," she says, one hand hovering near his elbow, but carefully not touching.

He leans in a little, bumping his arm into her hand, then lets her tug him into the apartment and onto the couch. He curls up on his side, head on one of the throw pillows.

"Sorry," he says, half into the upholstery.

"Don't be sorry, mijo," El says gently. "I'm so glad you came over."

Selfishly, he's glad, too. He doesn't really know how he made the

decision, but he's glad he did. He doesn't like—he doesn't like being alone, when he's like this.

El drapes a blanket over him.

"Okay?" Jason mumbles.

"We're all okay, Jason. Everything's okay."

Okay.

"Roy?"

"Calling him now, mijo."

Okay.

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"Knock, knock," Roy calls out for what has to be the four-hundredth time since he'd picked him up from El's early that morning.

"Still here," Jason answers, staring up at the ceiling from his spot on the couch. "Seriously, Roy, I'm good, you don't have to—"

"Jay, I get that you feel like you've gotta, so keep saying it if it makes you feel better," Roy says, "but I'm not leaving. I've already cleared my schedule, and Lian is happy to stay with Ollie and Dinah for a while. There's nowhere I'd rather be, okay?"

Jason drops his arm over his face, throat working.

In the kitchen, the sounds of cooking are replaced with soft footsteps. A moment later, Roy's hand squeezes his elbow lightly.

"It'll be okay, Jaybird," Roy says quietly. "Might take a bit, but you'll get through this, alright?"

Jason swallows hard, mouth pressed tight against the sudden wobbliness of his lower lip.

"Okay," he says once he's mostly sure it'll come out steady. "Thanks."

“No worries, bud,” Roy says, patting his arm once before heading back to the kitchen. “You want hot sauce?”

Jason agrees, not because he usually eats his eggs with hot sauce but because adding the stuff is usually the only way to make *Roy’s* eggs taste like anything other than cardboard.

“Okay,” Roy says once they’re both settled on the couch. “What’s on your docket?”

“Check in with Johnny,” Jason says. “Finalize the paperwork on the warehouse. And I’ve got a couple tips to check out—suspicious activity near the docks.”

“How do you feel about me checking out the docks for you? And tagging along when you go see Sheehan?”

Jason chews his eggs, trying not to make a face.

“Like I hate the idea,” he says finally. “…And like it’s stupid enough to go out at all, much less alone.”

Roy knocks his knee against Jason’s, leaning into his space, and Jason slumps over a little to press their shoulders together.

“I fucking hate this,” he mutters around a mouthful of scrambled eggs.

“I know,” Roy says quietly. “Thank you for doing it anyway.”

So, he starts a re-read of Pride and Prejudice, takes a nap, e-signs the last of the agreements for the warehouse purchase, reads some more, lets Roy make him dinner, and then suits up and heads to Johnny’s apartment building with Arsenal watching from a couple rooftops over.

By some miracle, Johnny’s managed to pull together a full crew in the less-than-24 hours since Jason asked him, so they make plans to start work the next day.

In another miracle, Johnny isn’t weird about Jason leaving so abruptly the night before. He doesn’t even ask what happened, which is good, because Jason still doesn’t fucking know.

He lets Roy shadow him back home, then runs comms for the rest of the night. It’s frustrating, which he’d expected, and unmooring, which he did not.

He doesn't know what the fuck is wrong with him, lately.

"Hey," Roy says after checking out the second of the three buildings on Jason's list. "Guessing you're not going to listen if I tell you to log off for the night, so. Do you mind if I ask your friend next door to come sit with you?"

Jason closes his eyes, exhaling carefully.

"Probably not a bad idea," he admits. "I—can you call her?"

"Yep," Roy agrees immediately. "I've got you. Let me get somewhere more secure."

Roy mutes himself for the call, which Jason would normally be annoyed by. Instead, he's just relieved he doesn't have to hear whatever they're saying.

A couple minutes later, Roy unmutes his line, and a minute after that, El knocks on his door, baby monitor in hand.

"Hey," he says, trying for a smile.

"Hug or no hug kind of day?" she asks.

Jason hugs her.

"I'll make some hot chocolate," El says when he pulls away. "You go sit back down."

"I'm not an invalid," Jason says, huffing a little, but he does what she says.

When she brings the mugs over to the dining table, he's in the middle of helping Roy track someone, so he just flashes her a smile and a quick 'thank you' in sign.

"Left," he tells Roy. "Two blocks, then hold. He's going up the fire escape."

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Three days later, Roy heads out the door after trapping Jason in a

bone-crushing hug and making him promise not to go out without Roy on comms.

The day after that, Jason is standing on the ground floor of his newly-purchased warehouse, leaning over actual, honest-to-God blueprints spread across a banged-up folding table.

He looks up when he hears the ancient box truck he sent Johnny off with pull up to the loading dock. The door rolls up and Johnny's recruits start piling out.

Leaving his helmet on the table with the blueprints, Jason walks over, barefaced except for the domino.

"All here," Johnny says when he spots him.

"Great, thanks, man," Jason says, then turns to the closest of the newcomers. "Claire, right?"

"That's me," the woman says, scowling a little like she thinks he's going to hassle her.

"Thanks for coming. This place needs a lot of work, and Johnny says you're the best plumber he knows."

Claire still looks a little startled at that, but just says: "Damn right I am."

"We've got coffee and donuts set up over there on the table, feel free to help yourself."

"Thanks," she says, only a little defensive. Grudgingly, she adds: "Good to be here."

Jason nods, smiling a little, and turns to the next guy.

"Carlos," the guy says, sticking his hand out for Jason to clasp.

"Insulation, right? Glad to have you, man."

Carlos grins. "Happy to help, loco."

Jason claps him on the shoulder. "Get some coffee. We'll go over the plan in a bit."

The rest of the crew loiters around him, waiting to introduce themselves until he's free, some of them getting coffee first and

circling back around.

He shouldn't really be surprised to see that more than half of them are Red Hoods, but even with all the time he's had, he still hasn't really gotten used to seeing all the white streaks, even if they're likely just in-group signaling at this point.

Once he's worked his way through the whole crew, he heads over to the table himself.

"Listen up!" Johnny hollers, which is a little embarrassing, but maybe necessary, considering the amount of chatter.

"Hi," Jason says into the sudden, total silence. "Thanks for coming out. I'm sure Johnny went over the basics with you, but…Some more-legal plans I had to get the homeless kids somewhere to stay before winter fell through, so we have to get a little creative. I'm not expecting any trouble, but I'd prefer to keep this under the radar, so I need everybody to keep quiet about it, yeah?"

There's a pause, and then a chorus of assent as they realize Jason's actually looking for a response.

"The cover if anyone asks what job you're working on is laid out here," Jason says, holding up a stack of printed out packets. "Take one before you leave today, and study it, but the gist is that some idiot developer is trying to gentrify the docks again."

There's a collective chuckle at that.

"Exactly," Jason says. "We've all heard that enough times to know they'll bail on the project the first time there's an Arkham breakout or territory dispute, so no one will wonder why the apartments never materialize. Stick to the story, don't mention me, and we'll be golden."

Another chorus of assent, and then Jason's calling the guy who actually made the blueprints, Dima, to come up and go over them.

It's nothing super complicated. It can't be, not in the time they have before winter hits.

But it'll do, for now.

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Jason chugs through the next ten days like a freight train.

He helps at the warehouse as much as he can, but there's usually not much he's useful for during the day except moving boxes and bringing lunch. With so many of the Red Hoods suddenly gainfully employed for the time being, though, there's more work to be done at night than usual, and he's uniquely qualified to pick up the slack.

As Halloween approaches, he finds himself pulling more and more of the kind of grueling, sunset-to-sunrise patrols he used to, back in those first years as Red Hood.

He doesn't remember it being this exhausting.

Back then, though, he spent ninety-nine percent of his non-patrol hours sleeping and eating.

Now, he spends more than half of it hanging out with Roy and Lian and/or El and the kids, watching Darius for Jada, or taking care of various other kids in the neighborhood when he's needed.

Between all of it, he barely has time to sleep, let alone cook, so he lives off of Eliana's charity and the pre- and post-patrol nutritional shakes he still uses Alfred's recipe for.

It's good for him, he thinks, keeping busy. He barely has time to think, and right now, that's probably a good thing.

Mercifully, Halloween itself is quiet. He manages to get a few hours of shut-eye in before running sandwiches over to the warehouse for lunch. He'd planned on sleeping a bit more in the afternoon, but they're doing demo so he ends up sticking around to help until late afternoon, leaving just enough time to grab a pre-patrol shake before heading out. He watches the Alley like a hawk all night, but nothing happens.

No breakouts or plots, just empty streets as the whole city holds its breath, then sighs in relief.

*You good?* Roy texts him after he gets home.

*All good,* he replies. *Just tired. Glad it's over*

Roy sends a thumbs up, then: *Still on for Zahra's tomorrow?*

Jason confirms, then passes the fuck out.

…

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…

“Jay,” El says, walking into the room, and Jason blinks his eyes open groggily. “The kids are almost ready, can you—”

She stops in the doorway, surprised.

“Mijo, get up,” she half-laughs. “We’re going to be late.”

Jason just groans in response, not moving an inch from where he’s sprawled face-down on her living room floor. He wasn’t *asleep* asleep, but he *was* dozing, and he’d like to continue.

El *actually* laughs, then.

“Don’t be mean to me,” Jason grumbles. “I’m in pain.”

“If you hadn’t been too proud to take breaks, you wouldn’t be in this position, would you?”

“I wasn’t too *proud.* I was busy. And I was *fine.*”

He *was*.

It’s just, well.

One of the consequences of maintaining a borderline-insane training regimen since adolescence is that it’s *really* easy to accidentally push too far when you’re not paying attention.

“Uh-huh,” El says skeptically. “And yesterday, at that warehouse, that had nothing to do with impressing your new friends?”

“No,” Jason says hotly. “Absolutely not.”

It wasn’t like that. They’d put a sledgehammer in his hands and pointed him at a wall, so he knocked down the wall. That was it.

Of course, it was *nice* that they said he was good at it, but it wasn’t—he wasn’t trying to *impress* anybody, they were just very appreciative and said he did a great job and he—

He liked that. He *really* liked that.

Wow.

*Wow.*

That is so goddamn embarrassing.

“Your ears are turning red, mijo.”

“Fuck off,” Jason groans miserably, wrapping his arms around his head.

El laughs at him again. He flips her off.

“I’ll sick the kids on you,” she threatens.

Jason peaks out at her from under one elbow, eyes narrowed.

“You wouldn’t.”

She opens her mouth, turning towards the hall to bedrooms, and Jason starts scrambling up.

“Okay, ok—fuck, *ow*, Jesus—I’m getting up.”

“Finally,” El says. “Costumes are on, bags are packed, it’s time to go.”

“Where’re the kids?” he asks, suddenly noticing the eerie lack of noise.

“In their rooms. They wanted their costumes to be a surprise, remember? They told you at lunch.”

Jason’s heart drops.

“Right,” he says quietly. “Right.”

He tries to remember what exactly they said, but he wasn’t paying attention, and that’s—

That’s so fucking shitty it makes him want to kick himself in the teeth.

“He’s ready!” El calls out to the kids and Jason’s not ready, he’s *not ready*—

But he’s the Red fucking Hood, so he plasters a grin on his face and reacts with appropriate shock and awe at each of the kids’ Halloween costumes, gasping theatrically when Danny, dressed as a t-rex, gives

him the tiniest, most adorably fierce attempt at a roar imaginable.

Lina's an alien Jedi she either made up or Jason just missed, Milo's Bingo from Bluey, Beto's clearly supposed to be Spider-Man (even if Jason doesn't recognize the suit design at *all*), and Mari, in a surprising expression of good taste, is dressed up as *Donna*, in the black and silver iteration of her suit.

"Nice," he tells her. "Troia's badass."

"Half the kids at school don't know who she is," Mari complains.

"How?" Jason asks, honestly aghast.

"I know! Lian will know, right?"

"Definitely," Jason says, trying not to grin. It's a safe bet, considering he's pretty sure Donna's babysat for Roy more than once.

"Where's your costume, Jay?" Beto asks.

"Yeah, Jay," Lina pipes up. "Why aren't you dressed up?"

"Guys, I'm a grown-up," Jason tries to explain. "Grown-ups don't dress up for—"

"No! No, Jay!"

"RAWR!"

"You have to dress up!"

"Yes, Jason," El says in a terrible Eastern European accent, re-entering the room in a black cloak, red lipstick, and plastic vampire fangs. "Vere's your costume?"

Jason drops his head into his hands, half laughing and half groaning.

"Okay, okay, you monsters," he says. "Hold on. I'll find something."

"Better do it fast!" El calls after him as he steps out of the apartment.

The urge to flip her off again is strong, but considering he'd also be flipping off five under-tens, he resists.

He's got basically all the clothes he owns dumped on his bed within sixty seconds, which is enough time to realize he really doesn't have

much in the way of costume pieces.

In fact, his wardrobe appears to be made up exclusively of white and black t-shirts, red and black hoodies, a couple pairs of joggers, jeans that have seen better days, one threadbare sweater, and that goddamn pair of khakis.

Jesus, he owns more leather jackets than he does pairs of non-tactical pants. That's kinda pathetic.

He's stumped for a minute, but then he spots the symbol splashed across the front of one of the hoodies and grins.

That'll work.

"Really?" El says when he steps out of his apartment. "That's the best you could do?"

"Hey! It was short notice."

"Exactly how much of her merch do you own?"

It's a fair question, considering his hoodie, joggers, baseball cap, and *socks* all match.

"Probably too much," he admits.

"I think you look great, Jay," Milo says kindly. "…What are you, though?"

"Can't you tell?" Jason asks, mock-offended. "I'm Wonder Woman's #1 fan."

"Ohhh," the quadlets chorus, except Danny, who roars.

"That's kinda lame," Mari says. "But I guess Wonder Woman's cool."

Jason scoffs. "Cooler than Troia."

"No!" Mari argues. "Troia is way cooler."

"Um, who do you think *trained* Troia?"

"Okay, so she's *old*, that's also lame."

"She's *ageless*, you little miscreant, not—"

“Okay, okay,” El says, ushering them all towards the stairwell. “They’re both cool. Let’s get going, we’re late.”

“Zahra won’t mind,” Jason grumbles.

“Well, *I* mind, so can we go?”

“Yeah, sorry,” Jason says, starting to hustle as he realizes she’s actually frustrated. “I’ll go pull the van around.”

Said van was a new acquisition, and the only vehicle he owned that he’d bought purely for civilian purposes.

It’s not like he could take the kids to the zoo on his *bike*, so Roy can make fun of him all he wants, but he’s not going to feel weird about it.

There’s no parking at their building, though, and it’d just get side-swiped on the street, with how wide it is, so he rents a spot at another building a block over.

He takes the stairs two at a time, then jogs down the street to get the car.

When he pulls it around, El and the kids are waiting on the sidewalk, so he hops out right away and opens the sliding back doors. Getting the kids buckled into their car seats is an ordeal, as always, but then they’re on their way, and all five are knocked out before they even hit the bridge.

“Did you do Halloween, when you were a kid?” El asks him.

“Nah,” Jason says. “Maybe when I was really little, but I don’t remember. Did you?”

“A couple times, when I was in high school. A friend had a car, we drove to Metropolis on the weekend. Just like this. It was fun. Even after you were adopted, you never…?”

“Oh,” Jason says, surprised. “Actually, yeah. I totally forgot. Obviously not on Halloween Halloween.”

“Right,” El agrees easily, because it’s Gotham. No one willingly goes out after dark on actual Halloween. “But you went trick-or-treating?”

“Yeah,” Jason says, a little quiet. He hasn’t thought about this in a long time. Years, probably. “Yeah, we, uh. B and I, we dressed up and everything. He had this whole—”

Jason stops, laughs a little.

“This wouldn’t surprise you at all if you knew him, but he had this whole, like, tactical plan for it. A fully mapped route around this random suburb we drove to, optimized for maximum candy haul. I think he used satellite imagery to check which houses usually turned their lights off during trick-or-treating hours, the absolute psycho.”

“What’d you dress up as?”

“…I don’t remember. Something I thought would embarrass him, I think. Maybe Green Lantern? B was Neo from the Matrix.”

“Have any fun?”

Jason swallows, blinking a little.

“Yeah,” he says. “One of the best nights of my life, honestly. B was… He was always *somebody*, you know? Day or night, if we were around other people, he had to be *on*. Masked up, either way. But that night, there were people everywhere, but B wasn’t anybody but himself. He was just—just my dad, and I was just his kid, and it was a perfect goddamn night.”

He clears his throat, shaking his head a little.

“God, I can’t believe I forgot about that,” he says, smiling, and glances over at El.

She’s not smiling.

“Sorry,” she says, catching him looking. “Sorry. I’m really glad you had that, mijo.”

“…But?”

“But nothing.”

“Okay,” Jason says slowly. There’s a beat of silence before he adds: “I would really rather you just tell me. I’m just—I’m just gonna be thinking about it, now. Did I—is this one of those times where I said something super messed up and didn’t realize? Or—”

“No, no, Jason, you’re fine. I just—”

Jason glances over quick, sees her biting her lip, then looks back at the road.

“It’s just hard,” she says finally, “to hear you talk about him so… fondly. When…”

Oh.

Jason doesn’t know what to say to that, so he doesn’t say anything at all for a while.

“He wasn’t,” he starts, stilted, “bad. When I was younger. I’m not—Roy used to say I made too many excuses for him, and—Well, he was right, so I’m not—I try not to do that anymore.”

Jason swallows hard, shifting his hands on the steering wheel.

“What he did was wrong, and nothing changes that,” he says, quiet but firm. “But he was a good dad, back then. He—he stayed home with me when I was sick, and he always had my back, and he *listened* like nobody had ever listened to me before. He’s shit at communicating and, yeah, that sucked sometimes, and he should’ve been better, should’ve worked out his own issues and baggage instead of letting it fall on me, but he was *good*.”

Jason takes a breath, wiping at his eyes even though the tears are just itching at him, not actually falling.

“I think it would be easier,” he continues, “if he hadn’t been, you know? It still would’ve hurt, but it wouldn’t have been such a *loss*. Sometimes, it feels like the Bruce from before, the one that was my dad, that he’s the one that died in that warehouse. For a long time, I tried to convince myself that he’d just cut me off from that side of himself. He was always two people. I thought…”

He shakes his head, lips pressed tight together.

“But he isn’t two people. He never was, it was always just *him,* and it’s…hard. To reconcile, I guess. Who he was with what he did to me. How badly I want to see him with how badly I never want to see him again.”

They sit in silence for a long moment, and then El says: “I’m sorry for bringing it up, Jay.”

Jason smiles at her, only a little sad.

“It’s okay,” he says. “I don’t mind talking about it, mostly.”

“Sorry that it happened, then.”

“Yeah. Thanks, I guess. Me, too.”

He clears his throat, hands shifting on the wheel a little.

“So. What’d you dress up as last time you did this?” he asks, suddenly desperate to talk about something else.

El, God bless her, doesn’t comment at all at the gracelessness of the subject change, just launches into the story, and Jason lets his shoulders relax and just drives.

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When they pull up to Zahra’s house, Jason can see Ashti through the window, standing on the couch so she can look out easier.

Her little face disappears as soon as she sees them stopping, so Jason hops out of the car right away, coming around just in time to scoop the little ankle-biter up as she races towards him, tossing her high in the hair.

“Again, again!” she cheers, so he throws her again, laughing, then hoists her over one shoulder like a sack of potatoes so he can give Zahra, who’d followed her out at a much more leisurely pace, a one-armed hug.

“Hello, Jason,” she says, smiling, and he grins back.

“Hey, Z.”

“Xal *Jason*,” Ashti half-whines, half-giggles.

“Did you hear that?” Jason asks, thick with confusion, looking around exaggeratedly. “Was that Ashti? Where is she?”

She giggles again and Jason whips his head around towards her, gasping.

“Ashti?! How did you get all the way up on my shoulder?”

“I didn’t, *you* did it!” Ashti says, words barely comprehensibly through

her giggling.

“I don’t think so,” Jason says dubiously. “I think I would remember doing that.”

“Dayê, make him stop being silly!”

Zahra smiles again. “I’m not sure that’s possible, baby. It’s not in his nature.”

Jason feels tiny hands latch onto his pantleg and looks down to see the mighty t-rex peering around Jason at Zahra.

“Hey, mijo,” Jason says, moving Ashti to a more stable position on his hip before dropping a hand onto Danny’s head and shoving it around affectionately. “You up for meeting new people?”

“Rawr,” Danny whispers.

“This is Danny,” he tells Zahra. “Danny, this is Miss Zahra. Do you want to say hello?”

“Rawr,” he says again, slightly louder, then puts his hands up expectantly.

Jason scoops him up with his free arm, listens closely as the kid whispers in his ear, then nods seriously.

“He says that was t-rex for ‘hello, nice to meet you, Miss Zahra.’”

Zahra’s eyes crinkle when she smiles.

“Nice to meet you, too, Mr. T-Rex. Happy Halloween.”

“Happy Halloween,” Danny whispers, mostly into Jason’s shoulder, but sort of at Zahra, before turning to Ashti. “Rawr.”

Ashti giggles. “You’re silly. I like your costume.”

“Rawr!” Danny says, then, whispering: “That means: I like your costume, too.”

Leaving the kids to their conversation below his chin, Jason looks back to see if El needs any help, but she’s already got all the kids out of the car and is distributing their candy bags.

The kids stream over one by one with their bags. Milo and Lina

promptly take on Danny's previous role as leg-clingers, Beto launches immediately into playing Spider-Man on the grass, complete with sound effects, and finally Mari and El come over.

"Zahra, this is my friend Eliana," Jason says, suddenly a little nervous. "El, this Zahra, and Tinkerbell here is Ashti."

"It's so good to meet you," El says, immediately going in for a hug.

"It is wonderful to meet you, as well," Zahra says, returning the hug without hesitation. "Jason talks about you all the time."

El smiles at Jason. "Does he?"

"A normal amount, yeah," Jason says, a little defensive.

"We are only teasing, Jason," Zahra assures him, resting a hand on his forearm.

Under his chin, Danny is trying to introduce the kids to each other, but it's slow going since he has to say it first in t-rex and then translate, so Jason takes over.

"Zahra, Ashti, this is Lina, Milo, Mari, you already met Danny, and Spidey over there is Beto."

"Thwip, thwip, AHHHHH!" Beto yells, doing a flailing somersault in the grass. "I'm Miles Morales and I'm the one and only Spider-Man!"

"Kiddos, this is Miss Zahra and her daughter Ashti, who's just a little younger than the quadlets."

"Hi, Miss Zahra," Lina says, echoed by Milo a second after.

Danny starts 'rawring' to be set down, so Jason puts him down, then Ashti wants down, too, and the two of them run off towards Beto with Lina and Milo in rapid pursuit.

"Hi," Mari says to Zahra when El nudges her, then immediately turns to Jason. "When is Lian gonna be here?"

"Soon, champ."

"Sorry," El says to Zahra. "She's hit the rebellious teenager stage about six years early."

"How soon?" Mari complains.

“Within fifteen minutes,” Jason says. “Why are you hanging out with us boring grown-ups? Go play with your siblings.”

Mari rolls her eyes, but she quickly joins in whatever hellish glorification of war they’re playing.

“The games the five of them come up with are sometimes…”

“Disturbingly violent?” Jason fills in. “Strangely accurate military history reenactments?”

“Intense,” El says dryly. “Half the kids in the neighborhood won’t play with them anymore. I can tell them to tone it down if it bothers Ashti.”

Oh, fuck. Would it bother Ashti? Zahra said she doesn’t remember, but that doesn’t necessarily mean—

“I don’t think it will, but I’ll let you know,” Zahra says, unconcerned. “She’s not usually easily phased.”

El, looking relieved, opens her mouth to respond, but that’s when Roy pulls up.

Lian’s out of the truck and off like a shot immediately, making a b-line for Mari, but Jason steps to the side and swings out an arm to (gently!) clothesline her.

“What am I, chopped liver?”

She promptly slams the heel of her hand into the side of his knee, forcing it to buckle and almost taking him right to the ground. Halfway to Mari in a flash, she pivots to run backwards for a few strides, grinning.

“Hi, Uncle Jay!”

“Good hit, squirt!” Roy calls after her as he walks towards the adults’ section of lawn.

“Thanks, Daddy!”

“Jesus Christ,” Jason swears, low enough it doesn’t carry to the kids, rubbing at his knee.

He and Roy make eye contact and in unison say: “Did you teach her —”

Jason huffs. “Jade.”

“Jade,” Roy sighs, half disappointed, half wistful.

“Gross,” Jason says, shoving him. “That’s Lian’s mom you’re thinking about.”

“Oh, I remember,” Roy says, grinning, and Jason shoves him again, which quickly escalates the situation into a wrestling match.

A wrestling match Jason *would’ve won*, except that he’s still so goddamn sore from yesterday and hasn’t had time to stretch.

Fucking sledgehammers.

“Ha,” Roy says smugly, rolling off of Jason and then neatly to his feet.

Jason kicks at his ankle, but he side-steps it without even looking, the asshole.

“Sorry about that,” Roy says with that easy cadence he gets when he’s happy. “You must be Zahra. Hi, I’m Roy.”

“Hello, Roy. It’s nice to meet you.”

“You, too,” he says smiling, then leans over to give El a hug. “Hey, El. How’re you doing?”

“Oh, alright,” El says. “Trying to keep this one out of trouble.”

“Ah, a Sisyphean task,” he says sagely, then, down at Jason: “Look, Jaybird, I’m cultured.”

Jason rolls to his feet, glaring. “I had to explain a Sisyphus reference to you *last month*, asshat.”

“Yeah,” Roy says easily, “and I remembered. Win-win.”

Jason lunges, only to stop short at Eliana’s: “*Boys*.”

He looks over at her guiltily.

“Sorry, El,” Roy says, slinging an arm over Jason’s shoulders. “We’ll behave.”

Jason scoffs, but the weight of Roy’s arm is as freakishly calming as always, and he can feel the aggression, even playful as it was, melting

right out of him.

“Dad, dad, look!” Lian yells, dragging Mari over. “Mari’s Troia!”

“Wicked.” Roy grins, ruffling Lian’s hair. “Looks awesome, Mar.”

Mari huffs like Roy’s being embarrassing, but it’s obvious she’s pleased.

Lian herself is dressed up as a character that Jason vaguely recognizes from one of her video games, with lots of fake leather and a foam sword strapped to her back.

“Do you mind if the kids use the bathroom here before we head out?” El asks Zahra.

She doesn’t, of course, so they herd the kids inside for a quick round of bathroom breaks, then make sure everyone has their candy bags and head out.

Everything’s going great until the kids spot a park and beg to go for a spin on the merry-go-round. Roy lopes off to lend his upper body strength to the task of making at least one of them puke cheap chocolate all over the playground equipment, and El and Zahra follow at a slower pace, pulling their phones out to take pictures.

Jason’s about to follow himself when one of the parents watching from the perimeter catches his eye.

Fucking hell.

They make eye contact, and the man gives a hesitant wave, looking slightly panicked.

He doesn’t approach, which is decent of him, Jason supposes, but it’s also fucking annoying.

They can just be fucking normal about this.

Jason walks over, trying and failing not to scowl. He stops next to the older man but doesn’t turn to face him, eyes locked on the merry-go-round.

“Hi, Jase,” Clark Kent says, a little hesitant.

Jason just grunts in response, crossing his arms.

“You look good.”

Jason’s eyes cut over to the man.

Really? ‘You look good?’

Whatever.

“One of those gremlins’ yours?” Jason says, ignoring the comment entirely.

“The pirate,” Clark says, and it only takes Jason a moment to spot the kid, even though there are a handful of pirates sprinting around.

The resemblance isn’t quite as strong as it is between Clark and Tim’s Superboy, but the kid’s still obviously Clark’s.

“You?”

Jason scoffs, rolling his eyes.

“What is it with you people and assuming I was a teen dad? Like, wow. Just because I grew up poor? That’s very classist of you Uncle Clark, I expected–”

“No, no,” Clark cuts him off, hands up in surrender. “No, Jase, it’s just–You’ll make a great dad someday. If that’s–if that’s something you want, I mean.”

There’s a beat of silence while Jason wraps his head around that and then Clark, the absolute jackass, says: “Also, kinda wild to assume I was talking about biological children. And insensitive, considering I’m adopted.”

“What the fuck. You’re just gonna UNO reverse me like that?” Jason says, disbelieving and more than a little delighted. “Jokes on you, farm boy, I was adopted *twice*.”

“Well, I don’t remember my biological parents at all.”

“Ha. I *wish* I didn’t remember mine. Abusive bio-parent relationships trump non-existent ones. Also, you got snapped up by literally the first couple that saw you, which is some fucking crazy levels of white privilege.”

“Ah,” Clark says, holding up one finger in an obnoxiously-literal I-have-a-point gesture. “I’m not *actually* white, though.”

Jason shoves his shoulder, and Clark has the good grace to let the hit rock him to the side a little.

“Only technically,” Jason accuses. “You pass.”

Clark grins and says: “So do you.”

“Oh, fuck off,” Jason laughs. “No fair. If Gotham ever got any fucking sun, this wouldn’t be a problem. When I lived in the desert, no one ever thought—”

Wait a second.

Thinking back on it, a lot of places he went, people tended to assume he was a local? Partially because he’s damn good with languages, sure, but he must also be some kind of ambiguous, features-wise.

Obviously, there’s regions of the world that never happened in. No one had ever assumed he was local in Visakhapatnam or Nairobi or Stockholm, and most of Asia tended to assume white or half-white. But as long as he’s winter-pale, he tends to blend in fine in even the least diverse regions of non-Scandinavian Europe, too.

He’d always assumed it was because he was mixed, but—

“Holy shit,” he says, incredulous. “Am I white?”

Clark cocks his head, looking at him quizzically.

“Sheila was white, I think,” Jason says, thinking out loud. “Willis was…ethnically ambiguous? Jesus fuck. I might be white. What the hell.”

“Ah, now we’ve hit genetic essentialism,” Clark says, his playful tone even gentler than before. “Your mom was Latina, Jason. Doesn’t matter that she wasn’t your bio mom.”

“Yeah,” Jason says slowly. “Yeah. Jesus Christ, though. What the fuck. Now I need to get an Ancestry test or something, God. What if I’m just like, fucking Italian or something? That’d be so embarrassing.”

Clark laughs.

“Fuck off,” Jason complains.

“Fucking off,” Clark says, hands up again, but he’s smiling at Jason like–like–

Fuck, Jason doesn't even know, but it's definitely fond, and that's weird as hell.

"It's good to see you, Jase," Clark says, tone also weirdly fond. "I missed you."

Jason crosses his arms over his chest, caught between annoyance, embarrassment, and, mortifyingly, elation. He fixes his gaze on the merry-go-round again.

"Not like you didn't know how to find me," he says without really meaning to.

God. Where's the nearest hole he can crawl into.

"I know," Clark says seriously. "I'm sorry. I didn't know if you would want to see me."

Jason scoffs lightly, refusing to look over, but as the silence stretches further and further, he caves.

"Why?" he asks.

Clark exhales slowly, looking upset. "Do you want the full list?"

Jason stares at him. Considering he's literally never had a problem with Clark except for the whole immature he-likes-Dick-better-than-me thing, he has literally no idea what even one entry on that list could be.

Well.

"If you're talking about the whole stopping B from killing Joker thing, don't be an idiot," Jason says.

The man carries kryptonite practically 24/7. If Clark stopped him, it was only ever because he *wanted* Clark to stop him.

"And if it's about me dying, that's also dumb, you were literally on another planet," Jason adds. "And I knew that then, too, so don't get all angsty about little-me calling for you and you not coming or whatever, 'cause I didn't."

Clark still looks upset.

"Really?" Jason asks, legitimately confused. "What else could you possibly–"

“He’s my friend,” Clark says quietly. “My best friend. And I didn’t see it. I never thought–”

He shakes his head, lips pressed together tightly.

Jason just stares at him, struck silent.

“We’re all capable of terrible things,” Clark says, looking up at the moon. “God knows I–Well, there’s only so many fascist dictator versions of yourself you can encounter before having to accept your own capacity for evil. Bruce–Bruce has always guarded against that, for me. It bothered me when we were younger, but now…Now, I’m grateful that I’m not the only one keeping an eye on me.”

He looks over at Jason, and, like a deer in headlights, Jason can’t look away.

“I wasn’t keeping an eye on him, and what he did to you was–God. It was unforgivable, and I didn’t see it. I didn’t stop him, and I’ll never forgive myself for that, Jason. Never.”

Jason should probably say something, or at least stop staring, but his mind is just white noise, a hundred half-completed thoughts banging around against each other and none of them getting anywhere.

“I’m sorry,” Clark says after a minute. “I shouldn’t have sprung that on you.”

The words break Jason at least partially out of the maelstrom in his head, and he looks away.

“No,” he says, voice a little hoarse. “No, that’s–It’s okay. Thanks for… Fuck. I don’t know. Just. Thanks. I–It means a lot.”

“It’s nothing,” Clark says immediately. “The least I could do.”

Jason just nods along dumbly, still a little stuck in his head.

After a minute, he says: “You’re keeping an eye on him now, then, yeah?”

“All the time,” Clark says, a little grim.

Good.

Good, that’s–

That's good.

"And he's…?"

"Right now? Playing sudoku in his study."

"Sudoku?"

Clark shrugs. "He's had to find hobbies."

Jason huffs out a startled laugh.

Fucking sudoku. God.

"And Duke?" he asks.

"At a movie with his cousin."

Jason exhales a long, measured breath, thinking.

"You can't really mean all the time," he says.

"No," Clark agrees. "Alfred lets me know when he's got eyes on him, and Diana takes shifts when she can."

Jesus. They're really not fucking around.

After another long moment of silence, Jason asks, voice quiet: "You really think he'd hurt the kid, then?"

"No," Clark answers. "No, but—"

He hesitates, searching Jason's face for something.

"He's done what he's done," he says finally, apparently having found what he was looking for. "Nothing can change that. Doesn't matter how much he changes or how long he stays on the straight and narrow, I'll still be watching. But he will be, too, I think."

Jason takes a moment to digest that, then says: "So he's fucked up about it, then."

Clark stays quiet, clearly hesitating to say anything.

"I get that you're trying to protect me or whatever," Jason says, trying really hard to not be calm about it. "But I'm really fucking tired of people not telling me shit."

Clark winces, which means he probably got a whole ass report on the fight at Bat Central.

“It distresses him, yes.”

“Distresses,” Jason repeats wryly. “Okay. How distressed is he, then? For real.”

“You really want to know?”

“Yes, I want to know, I just told you that. Jesus fucking–”

“He tried to take his own life. Changed his mind before it was too late and called me, but…it was pretty close.”

Jason swallows, mouth dry. He drags a hand down his face, rubbing at his eyes for a minute, thinking.

“He’s okay, though?” he asks finally, voice small.

“He’s okay. He scared the hell out of us, but he scared the hell out of himself, too, I think. He wrote up a safety plan with his therapist, and he puts up with being babysat when he needs to be.”

“Babysat?”

“When he’s in a bad headspace, he can’t—It’s not always safe for him to be alone.”

Jesus.

This is what he meant when he told El it would be easier if he could just hate him. Just the idea of them being in the same room has Jason’s fight or flight reflex kicking in in zero-point-two-five seconds, but the thought of him hurt, let alone hurting *himself*, makes Jason want to drive straight to Gotham and never let him out of his sight again.

“Do the others…?”

Clark makes a so-so gesture with his hand. “Dick at least suspects, and I’m sure Cass knows. But no, he hasn’t told them. He’s, uh. Developed a lot of anxiety about being around them at all and refuses unless Diana or I are there.”

“Even Dick?” Jason asks incredulously. “Even *Cass*? Either of them can at least hold their own against him.”

“Yeah,” Clark agrees. “But they shouldn’t have to. *You* shouldn’t’ve had to, Jase.”

Jason swallows, blinking hard.

He thinks he’s done talking about this for today.

“Right,” he says after a second. “Okay. Thanks for telling me.”

“You’re welcome,” Clark says gently. “If there’s anything else I can do, please let me know, okay kiddo? Anything, anytime. Just call my name and I’ll be there.”

“Okay,” Jason says, and, crazily, finds himself actually meaning it.

“Can I–”

“Beto!” El yells, and Jason jerks his head up to see Beto sprinting towards him. Past him, El and Zahra are stopping the other kids from running after him and Roy is in hot pursuit.

“Jay, come spin us! It’s so fun, come on, let’s go!” Beto says, latching onto Jason’s hand and throwing all his weight into trying to drag him.

“Got you,” Roy says, reaching them a moment later and scooping Beto up. “Come on, Jason’s busy. He’ll play with you in a little while.”

“Promise?”

“Promise, mijo,” Jason promises.

Beto huffs a little in complaint, but he runs back to the playground when Roy sets him back down with an encouraging push.

“Clark,” Roy says, a little guarded.

“Good to see you, Roy,” the older man says, smiling. “How’ve you been?”

“Fine.” His eyes cut over to Jason. “You good?”

“Yeah,” Jason says honestly. “Thanks.”

Roy nods. “Just yell if you need me.”

“Yes, mom.”

Roy flips Jason off, but he doesn't threaten Clark or anything as he heads back to the kids, so he's being chill about it.

"Can I give you my number?" Clark asks after a moment of only slightly awkward silence. "For if you need something, but don't want to talk in person, I mean."

"Yeah," Jason says. "Yeah, let me…"

Jason digs his phone out of his pocket and hands it over. He watches Clark type in his number in a disbelieving sort of daze.

"There," Clark says, smiling as he hands it back. "Please don't hesitate to use it, okay?"

Jason just nods, unable to think of anything to say.

Clark must realize that, though, and doesn't seem to mind. He stands up and places a hand on Jason's shoulder, telegraphing the movement clearly so Jason can stop him if he wants to.

Jason doesn't want to.

Clark squeezes his shoulder gently and says: "I'll get out of your hair. Happy Halloween, Jason."

"Happy Halloween," Jason echoes, feeling a little silly for it.

But Clark just smiles again, giving Jason's shoulder one last squeeze before he walks over to the swings to collect his kid.

"You good?" Roy asks, and Jason starts a little, not having noticed his approach.

"Yeah," he says. "Yeah. All good."

"Good," Roy says and throws an arm over Jason's shoulder, tugging him towards the merry-go-round. "The kids want you to spin them."

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They finish the warehouse a few days after Halloween and a few days ahead of schedule. The whole crew is exhausted after weeks of long

hours, but there are smiles all around, and somebody snuck in a cooler full of beer to celebrate with.

Jason doesn't drink, not wanting to smell like alcohol when he goes looking for the kids later, but he sticks around anyway, playing rounds of darts and bags with increasingly ridiculous handicaps until Dima calls for a vote and he's banned flat out in a landslide.

"Sorry, man," Johnny says, clapping him on the shoulder. "Take it as a compliment."

Jason rolls his eyes, but he doesn't really mind. He's happy enough to watch from the sidelines and heckle.

Once the intoxication levels get high enough that they're in danger of somebody breaking a bottle and having to sweep the whole damn place again, Jason calls it and sends everyone home with a bonus in hand, any beer leftover, and a personal thank you.

They'd done good work.

All there is to do, now, is move the kids in, and that shouldn't take long. He'd put the word out weeks ago that he was putting a safehouse together, and knowing how fast information spreads in those circles, he'd be surprised if there's a single homeless kid left in the city who doesn't know.

All he has to do is let them know it's ready and how to find it, and for that, he just needs to find a couple of them. Word will spread on its own from there.

He finds Sel first.

"Big man," they say, popping their head up from the dumpster they were digging for cans in. "What's up?"

"Hey, Sel," Jason says, ruffling the kid's hair. "Finished fixing the safehouse up. Wanted to let you know you can swing by any time, check it out."

"No way. For real?"

"For real," Jason confirms, and gives them the address, and the code to get in the back door. "We'll beef up security later, but I'm expecting a bit of an influx in the next couple days and don't want anybody hanging around outside in the open."

Sel nods rapidly, grinning.

“Awesome. It’s getting chilly.”

“Yeah,” Jason agrees. He’s glad they finished early. “There’s a hammock with your name on it, and the bathrooms and kitchen are stocked. Help yourself to anything.”

Sel’s eyes go a little wide, but they just nod.

“You sure it’s safe?” they ask, a little hesitant.

“I won’t make a promise I don’t know for sure if I can keep,” Jason says, wishing he had a better answer. “But it’s as safe as I can make it, and I’ll be keeping an eye out.”

Sel nods, grimmer and more knowing than anyone that age should be.

“Safer than out here, then,” they say, and Jason nods in agreement. “Alright. I’ll see you there, big man.”

The next kid he finds is Manny, a six-year-old who usually has an older girl with him that he calls his cousin but probably not in the literal blood-related sense.

“Hey, kiddo,” Jason says, sitting down in the grass with him. “Where’s Luna?”

“Workin’,” the kid says.

“You know when she’ll be back?”

“Before dark,” Manny says, which explains why she’d left him in a public park, but the sun set ten minutes ago.

“Okay,” Jason says, thinking. The kid’s got a sweater, but no coat. “Okay. Um. How about I take you somewhere warmer, and then go find her and bring her to you, okay, buddy?”

“Luna said to wait here,” the kid says, unsure.

“I know. I know, but it’s getting pretty dark out, yeah? I’ll leave a note for her here, so she doesn’t worry.”

Manny frowns, considering for a minute, then nods and stands up.

“Okay, Mr. Hood.”

Jason smiles at him. “Sounds good. Let me just–”

He spray paints a red bat symbol on the grass with the miniature can he keeps in his belt, then scoops Manny up.

By the time they get to the warehouse, there are already half a dozen kids there.

Sel’s already set up their hammock and is eating a sandwich in it, and they’re probably the oldest one here, so Jason heads their way.

Sel looks up as he walks over, grinning. “Hey! This place is awesome, man!”

“Glad you like it,” Jason says. “Hey, can I ask you for a favor?”

“Anything, big man,” Sel says easily, stuffing the last bite of their sandwich in their mouth. “Hit me.”

“Can you keep an eye on Manny here for a bit? I need to go track down his cousin.”

“Sure, no problem,” Sel says before turning to the kid. “Hey, little man. I’m Sel.”

“Hi,” Manny mumbles, yawning a little. He’d been dozing against Jason’s shoulder most of the way over.

“Thanks, Sel,” Jason says, passing the little guy over. “Make sure he eats something?”

“‘Course,” they say easily. “Go do your thing, man. I’ve got him.”

“Thanks,” Jason repeats, and heads back out into the night.

When he gets to the park, Luna’s not there, so he continues his sweep, hoping he finds her either along the way or back at the warehouse.

He runs into a few more kids, asks them if they’ve seen Luna, and sends them off with an offer to stay at the warehouse and directions on how to get there if they change their minds when they say no. When midnight rolls around, he heads back to the warehouse, hoping to find her there, but no dice.

There are still a few kids up and milling around, eating sandwiches or taking advantage of the free showers, but most are asleep in the hammocks, including Sel and Manny, who are curled up together and

both out for the count.

“Hey, Hood,” an older kid Jason knows by face but not by name calls out. “You’re looking for Luna, yeah?”

“That’s right,” Jason says. “You seen her?”

“’Bout an hour ago, yeah,” the kid says. “She’d sold some tires, was on her way back. I hadn’t heard yet, or I woulda told her.”

Okay. Good that it’s just tires, bad that it’s just tires and she’s still not back.

“Which street?”

The kid tells him, and Jason thanks them quickly before barreling out of the warehouse and–

“Hey, Hood!”

Oh, thank fuck.

“Luna,” he exhales, relieved. “Hey. You alright?”

“Yeah,” Luna says easily. She’s got a little grease smeared on her face and a little more on her pantlegs, but she doesn’t look hurt. “I think I missed you at the park by like ten minutes, sorry, got caught up. Is Manny okay?”

“Yeah,” Jason says. “He’s good. Come on inside, you must be cold.”

He ducks inside long enough to point her towards Sel and Manny, then heads back out.

By the time he’s tracked down all the kids he hasn’t already heard from, sunlight’s leaking over the horizon.

It’s not a good long-term fix. The warehouse is still pretty barebones, and without legal solutions, a lot of the kids won’t have access to the education and healthcare they should.

But with a Bat-grade invisible fence in place at the perimeter and a rotation of Red Hoods scheduled to check in periodically and be on call if something trips the fence, Jason is as sure as he can be that the kids are safe.

For tonight, anyway, it’s enough.

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Roy and Lian drive over that weekend, as planned. Like he does every time, Roy knocks to be let in even though he has his own key and Jason keeps telling him to just come in.

He says it's about boundaries and Jason having 'his own space' or something, the fucking weirdo.

"Hey, Jaybird," Roy says when Jason opens the door, smiling. "Taking it easy for the day?"

"Try the *week*," Jason counters, despite knowing he'll at least go check on the warehouse before the kids go to sleep.

"Hear that, Li? It's a PJs and movies weekend."

"Can we make a blanket fort?"

"Sure, we can. How are we feeling about pizza for dinner?"

"Pizza sounds great," Roy agrees. "I'll figure on ordering around six—don't worry about trying to stay awake. You look beat."

"Thanks," Jason says gratefully. "We'll see how long I hold out."

The answer, in the end, is not even fifteen minutes. He barely remembers turning on the movie before he's out cold on the living room floor.

He wakes up disoriented, but not in a bad way. Eventually, he realizes the brightly colored fabric above him is one of his spare blankets. Roy must've gotten it out of the linen closet for Lian to use in her fort.

He's a little sore from sleeping on the floor all afternoon.

The deadbolt clicks into place, Roy humming a little to himself as he carries the pizza over into the kitchen.

"Pizza time, baby girl," Jason murmurs, nudging the seven-year-old curled against his side to full wakefulness as he sits up, blinking away the last of his sleep.

They eat dinner, and after they're done, Jason suits up and goes to check on the warehouse.

He makes sure all the kids there had enough to eat today and have enough for tomorrow.

He checks in with the Red Hoods in the area, makes sure someone is handling meals tomorrow, and puts himself on the schedule for the next day.

When he gets home, Roy is making tea in the kitchen. Lian, nowhere to be seen or heard, is likely already asleep in Jason's bed.

He should go into the kitchen, but he curls up on the couch instead, arms wrapped around his middle and chin tucked.

Who knows how long later, Roy is crouching down in front of him, brow creased lightly.

"Hey, there," he whispers. "Didn't hear you come in."

Jason closes his eyes, mouth pressed tightly shut.

"Oh, Jaybird," Roy says, soft and sad, and Jason has to swallow hard against the lump in his throat.

"Feeling touch-positive?"

Jason shakes his head a little.

He can't—

He can't, right now. His skin crawls a little just thinking about it.

"Alright," Roy says easily. "Tea?"

Jason pushes himself mostly upright and accepts a cup of chamomile.

Roy sits down on the other end of the couch, enough space in between them that it doesn't unsettle Jason any further.

"You want to talk about it?"

Jason shakes his head, warm mug pressed against his breastbone.

"Okay," Roy agrees. "Maybe later."

They sit in silence for a long time as Jason tries and mostly fails to pull himself together.

Sometime after his tea's gone cold, Jason lays back down, this time with his head in Roy's lap.

"It's gonna be okay," Roy tells him, rubbing circles into his back with his thumb. "We'll be okay."

Hours later, Jason eases himself up off the couch, careful not to disturb Roy, and heads up the access stairs to the roof.

He sits out there for a while, just breathing. Trying not to think about anything at all.

The next day, before they leave, Roy pulls him to the side.

"You should come back to Star," he says seriously. "Just—just for a while. Get your head back on straight."

Part of him wants to take him up on it. Badly.

"I can't," he says. "It's only been a couple days. I can—If everything runs smoothly this week, maybe I can come out there next week. Take a vacation."

"Jaybird…"

"Roy, I'll be fine," Jason promises. "I know—I know I'm kinda fucked up right know, but I'll be careful, okay? It's just a week."

"Okay," Roy says reluctantly, pulling Jason into a hug. "Call me if you need anything, okay? Anything. I can drive back out."

He walks them to Roy's car and waves to Lian as they pull away, then goes back inside. He sits down on the couch and opens his book.

He stares at the page, trying to force the ink to resolve into words.

He's fine.

He's fine.

Chapter End Notes

Narrator: He was not fine.

End Notes

So remember when I said I had more in mind for this universe almost one whole year ago? This actually wasn't what I was talking about at all. At the time, I was working on a one-shot about Talia going back for Jason when Ra's has him after the batarang incident, but my hard drive crashed a few months later and I lost everything on it (including, funnily enough, the entirety of *the living sea of waking dreams*, which I rewrote from memory in a long weekend like a literal crazy person). Needless to say, I learned my lesson about back-ups, but I still haven't gotten around to rewriting the Talia one-shot and since finishing *waking dreams*, all I've really felt like writing is happy shit, so here you go. Let me know if there's a particular character or situation you'd like to see as Jason reacclimates to Gotham, I've got ideas floating around for most of the Batfam, but I'm open to suggestions.

Please drop by the Archive and comment to let the creator know if you enjoyed their work!